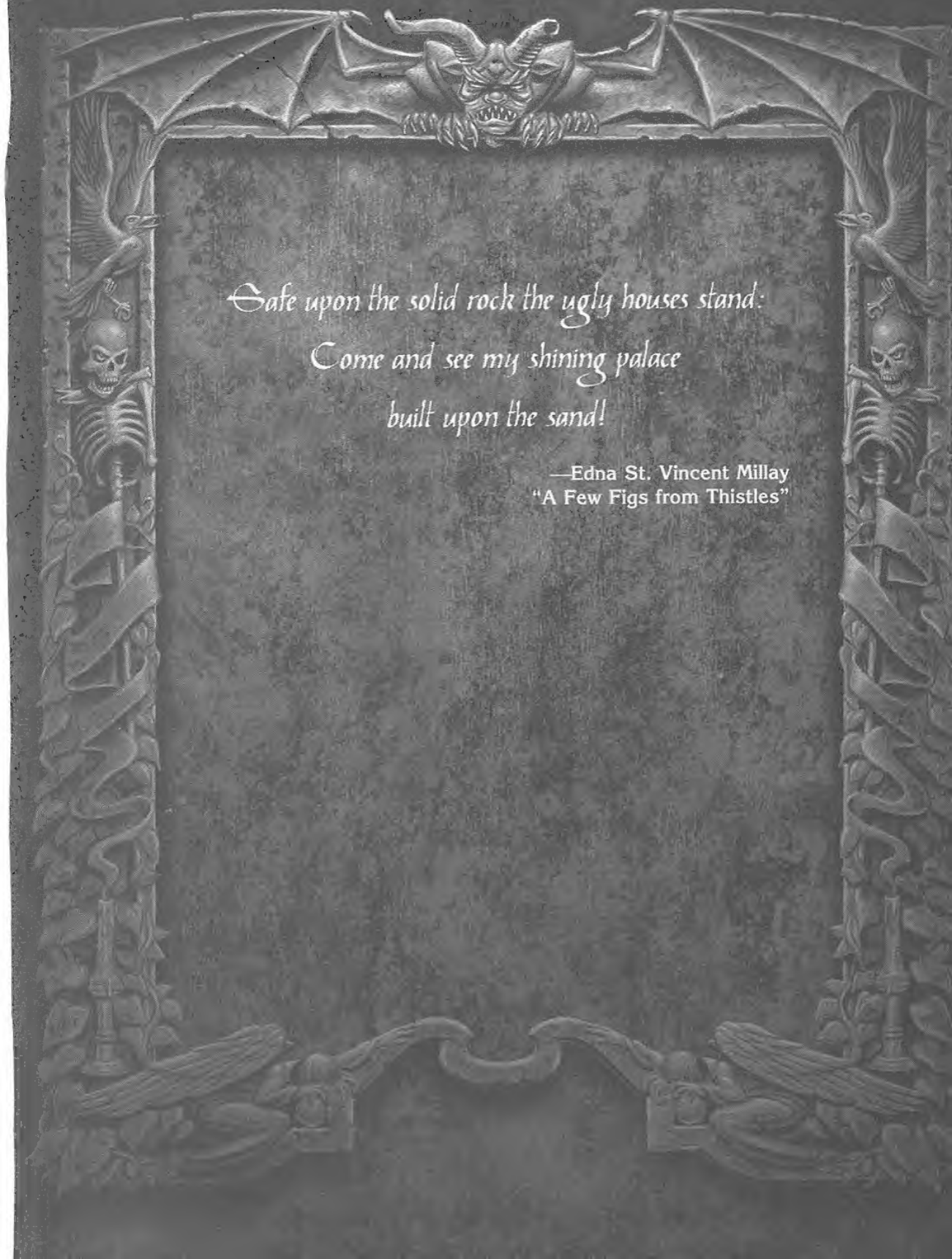
Vistani



Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand:
Come and see my shining palace
built upon the sand!

—Edna St. Vincent Millay
"A Few Figs from Thistles"

Section, The Second:

We are the music-makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams;
World-losers and world-forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams:
Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world forever, it seems.

—**Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy**
"Ode"

Introduction

For more than three decades, now, I have undertaken to investigate and expose creatures of darkness to the purifying light of truth and knowledge. "Hero" I am named in some circles; "sage" and "master hunter" I am called in others. That I have survived countless supernatural assaults is a marvel among my peers; my name is spoken with fear and loathing among my foes.

In truth, this "virtuous" calling began as an obsessive effort to destroy a vampire who murdered my child, and it has become for me a tedious and bleak career. Perhaps Lord Azalin enjoys the mantle of nobility as he sits at Castle Avernus, but nobility is a dead weight hung from my own neck, and it grows heavier each passing day. Even as my life of hunting monsters began, I felt the weight of time on my weary shoulders. Today I am a man who has simply lived too long. Like a regretful lich (as I suspect Lord Azalin to be!), I find myself inextricably bound to an existence I sought in madness and, seemingly, must now endure for all eternity. Of course I shall die, but whether I shall ever rest in my grave haunts my idle thoughts, and torments me in my dreams.

By now, I can consider myself an expert on vampires, ghosts, liches, lycanthropes, golems, mummies, and all their ilk. Much have I written concerning these evil creatures, and many of them have been properly expunged from the world as a result. Yet I do not believe that this land of ours is any purer for my efforts. And I must wonder: How many brave young heroes have sought glory, armed with my research, and met unspeakable ends in spite of it? How many have died (and worse) through some crucial omission of fact, some subtle failure to report the whole truth about one of those monsters? How many of my own, precious comrades have suffered—perished—as I collected data for my infamous guidebooks? Was there ever so ignominious a scholar as myself?

It matters little that my beloved friends and comrades-at-arms entered freely into my company. Small compensation that many of them have expressed a profound sense of fulfillment in aiding my cause, even in the midst of their premature death throes. The indisputable fact remains that I am ever awash in their blood, drowning in guilt, surely lost to redemption for my part in their destruction.

Without doubt, to accept my company is to embrace doom, and I cannot deny awareness of that fact. From the very beginning of my quest to destroy creatures of evil, I have carried Death itself with me like a virulent disease, infecting all who dared to walk with me!

A Confession

I expect that those who think me a hero will change their minds when they know

the whole truth about my life as a hunter of the unnatural. Nevertheless, I must reveal, here and now, that I have been the indirect yet certain cause of many deaths, and the loss of many good friends. Mistake me not! I do not merely feel sorry for myself. Rather, I come to grips with a devastating realization:

Though I would not at first acknowledge it, and for quite some time could not even concede the possibility, I now see that I am the object of a baneful Vistani curse. More tragically, the nature of this hex is such that I have not borne the brunt; instead, far worse, those who surround me have fallen victim to it! Let me go back to the beginning, to the day I became an unwitting tool of darkness, and enhance the reader's perspective with the whole truth, withheld until now.

In my *Guide to Vampires*, I related the tragic story of how my only child Erasmus was taken by Vistani and sold to the vampire Baron Metus. I explained how Erasmus was made a minion of the night stalker, and how it was my miserable part to free him from that fate at the point of a stake. Finally, I recounted the woeful loss of my beautiful wife Ingrid, murdered by that same Baron Metus in retaliation for my successful (if one could call it that) reclaiming of my son.

All that is true enough, and it pains me still these many years later. What I have neglected to illuminate is how I tracked those Vistani kidnappers across the land, or how I "extracted" Erasmus's whereabouts from them. To think back on it fills me with remorse and self-loathing, yet I must let the full truth be told before I can proceed to the subject of this, my latest treatise.

In fact, the Vistani took Erasmus with my own, unwitting permission. They had brought an extremely ill member of their tribe to me one evening and insisted that I treat him, but I was unable to save the young man's life. In fear of their retribution, I begged the Vistani to take anything of mine if they would only withhold their terrifying powers, of which I knew nothing. To my lasting astonishment, they chose to surreptitiously take my son in exchange for their loss! By the time I realized what had occurred, they were already an hour gone.

Incensed beyond reason, I strapped the body of the dead Vistana to my horse and doggedly followed that caravan through the woods of western Darkon, naively allowing the sun to set before me without seeking shelter from the night. Shortly after darkness fell, I was beset by monsters who would have slain me, had not Lord Azalin himself intervened and spared my life, for reasons that I do not completely understand. He somehow detected me and, with his powerful magic, took control of a pack of zombies that wandered in the forest. He spoke to me through the mouths of the dead things, a feat doubtless easy for him to perform if he is, as I believe him to be, a wizard-lich.

In short, Lord Azalin placed a magical ward against undead on me, then animated the dead Vistana and bade me learn if it still possessed the ability to travel by magical means common to all Vistani, and thereby find its people. Unfortunately (I say in hindsight), the plan worked. I found the child-stealers, but my unwelcome entourage included a growing horde of voracious undead that could not touch me, thanks to Azalin's ward.

There is only a little more to tell, but it is the most difficult to report. I make no excuses for my actions: Indeed, none can be made. When I found the caravan, I threatened to set the zombies on the Vistani unless they returned my dear boy. They replied that he had been sold to Baron Metus.

Something inside me snapped. I went insane with fury and released the zombies, and the entire tribe was eaten alive! I brought about the horrifying deaths of them all! Yet the story has not ended.

Before she died, the leader cursed me, saying, "*Live you always among monsters, and see everyone you love die beneath their claws!*" Even now, so many years later, I can hear her words with painful clarity. A short time later,

Erasmus and Ingrid were ruthlessly torn from my loving arms, and I foolishly believed that the curse had exacted its deadly toll. I wept until an insatiate desire for vengeance filled the bottomless rift in my heart.

Now, after more than three decades of bloodshed and agony and loss, it has slowly dawned on me that the Vistana's curse had never slaked its own thirst for revenge. Reluctantly determined to know the truth, I at last consulted with Inarin Alster, a diviner wizard of no small ability, and he confirmed my worst fears!

The curse lingers even to this day, and all the true and stalwart friends I have known and lost are victims, not of outrageous fortune, but of my actions. True to the words of the dying Vistana, my life has been shielded from fate again and again, while those whom I esteem above any treasure have taken my place! For my nearly forgotten act of hatred, I have served up the flesh of my most cherished companions to feed the appetites of darkest powers!

When the horrifying enormity of my revelation swept over me, I railed bitterly at the cruel irony of my life. I recklessly swore to burn every word I had ever written, and very nearly did so. I even contemplated deliberately ending my wretched existence in the most violent of ways. Most of all, I cursed the Vistani, who had made a monster of me and a mockery of my most noble aspirations, and I swore to murder every last Vistana I could find.

Thankfully, patience and wisdom stayed my hand. Drained of all spirit, I cast myself into bed and wept, as I had not done since my former, blissful life was forever ripped from me.

That very same night, I awakened from my nightmares with a start, for my well-ingrained instincts told me I was not alone. I sat up abruptly and stared about my bedroom, quickly focusing on a dark figure seated in the corner chair. As I struggled to part the void between sleep and wakefulness, the remnants of my night terrors took the intruder's shape and seemed to advance upon me with deadly intent. Witless and frightened, I cried out like a snatched babe in the jaws of a fleeing wolf.

"Fear not, Rudolph Van Richten," said a gravelly, male voice. "I am come to heal you. I am come to heal us both."

Hastily I lit a lantern by my bed and held up the light to see my uninvited visitor. By then I had steeled myself against the unexpected. Yet still I gasped aloud, for the man had the look of a darkling, a creature who was once a Vistana but was cast out of his tribe for breaking a law or taboo. My first thought was that he had come to murder me as a means to appease his former people. Dark-skinned and gaunt, he gazed at me with eyes that burned cold. His bony hands rested in his lap, yet his long, jagged fingers flexed slightly, as if he might suddenly lash out at me.

I seized the silver dagger which I keep beneath my pillow and brandished it at him, yet he made no move except to smile grimly.

"I am Arturi Radanavich," he told me, and waited for the name to sink in. Sink in it did.

Radanavich was the surname of the Vistani tribe that stole my son, and whom I slaughtered in revenge! My jaw dropped in remembered horror.

"Yes, the same," he said in response. "I am the sole survivor of that terrible night so long ago, when you gave my people to the undead, though I was only a child then."

"I thought no one had survived."

"I hid in my Nana's *vardo*, in a chest of magical clothing. The monsters would not touch it."

After an awkward moment, I mumbled, "What do you want of me?"

"I am come to heal you."

"Heal me? What do you mean?"

"You are cursed by my tribe, Dr. Rudolph Van Richten, as you now finally realize, to live forever among monsters and see all whom you love die by them."

"Yes," I growled. "I know."

"But I, too, am cursed—by you."

"By *me*?"

"Do you not recall? No sooner did Nana lay her curse on you than you

returned a deadly curse of your own. I will never forget the sound of your voice as you cried, 'Undead take you as you have taken my son!'

"Yes, I have been pursued these many years by the walking dead. They follow me wherever I go, like a golem tracking its creator, and they make me an outcast. No tribe will grant me asylum. No Vistana or *giorgio* will take pity on me. Nothing removes the taint you have put on the name of Radanavich!"

Giorgio. I recognized the term Vistani use among themselves to signify outsiders, but vocabulary was not my overriding concern. "Can you blame me?" I cried, suddenly transported to the past. "You stole my child and sold him to a vampire!"

Arturi struggled with his own wrath, but he held up his hand in a gesture of placation. "I know, and that is why I am here. I wish to break our mutual curse."

I was stunned. "How can you do that?"

"I have the power to break the curse my Nana laid, but first you must lift your own."

"Again, how?"

For a moment, the exiled Vistana's face betrayed some carefully concealed pain or remorse. "Forgiveness!" he finally blurted. "You must forgive us."

My heart hardened at the thought. "No! That I can never do!"

"Then there is no cure for the curse," said Arturi, his face dark. "And there is no more to discuss." He arose and strode in the direction of the door.

"Wait!" I cried. He paused and turned. "I do not refuse you on a malicious whim. Tell me, how can I absolve the Vistani of evil when all I have known of them is cruelty beyond humanity?"

"The Vistani are not cruel, not evil! You *giorgios* hate them, for it is through fear that you see them. If you studied them as you have studied so many true monsters, then perhaps you would understand that."

Hope's first rays shot into the black void of my heart. Of course! That was the answer!

"Then teach me, Arturi," I told him. "Tell me about the Vistani, and help me to understand so that I may forgive."

A smile slowly spread across the man's face. "Perhaps I can do better. I cannot live among my people, but neither am I hated by them. I will take you among them, that you may learn their ways and comprehend life through their eyes.

"Your name is not well loved among the Vistani, Dr. Van Richten. They will not treat you with respect, though they may well treat you with fear—in that common emotion you may at least understand one another. But for my part, I believe they will tolerate you. Perhaps, in time, we can all accept each another.

"A curse brings no joy to the heart of a Vistana, my . . . friend. Only the powers of hatred which rule this land profit by it. Let us destroy the evil together, and allow the past to assume its proper place in our lives!"

He approached me, holding out his hand, and I took it with both of mine.

"Yes!" I said, suddenly filled with a sense of hope that I had forgotten existed. That brief and shining moment became the genesis of this, my *Guide to the Vistani.*

The Vistani are a complex people, with ancient roots that sink into the past beyond their own reckoning, so it is difficult to impart an objective representation of their culture. The only way to truly know them is to be one of them. Even such a rare *giorgio* as myself, who has shared their campfires and listened to their mournful hearts, cannot ever completely comprehend them.

What I can assure the reader is that these people are not to be trifled with. They are not nearly as malevolent as the subjects of my previous works, but they can be just as dangerous. They will not allow any familiarity. Those who have read this book, beware! To the contrary, they might perceive any who know of their ways as a threat. Never approach them lightly, as there is little hope for mercy if you enrage them. My own life should be ample proof of that.

There is something in October sets the gypsy blood astir.

—William Bliss Carman
"A Vagabond Song"

CHAPTER ONE: HISTORY AND LEGENDS

do not believe that any Vistana (for that is the singular term, while Vistani is the plural) could be convinced to settle down and claim a permanent home; a spirit of freedom and wanderlust permeates every fiber of his or her being. In a very real sense, a Vistana who ceases to wander also ceases to be a Vistana.

Nevertheless, every tribe has a legend of a homeland, recalled in bittersweet fondness and told in a voice animated by a spark of wistful hope, as if the eternal drifters expect to one day regain their blissful seat and never leave it again. Each night, when the indigo heavens shimmer with stars, they gather around their bonfire for a ritual they call the *prastonata*, wherein the Vistani dance and sing until the children's heads begin to nod. Finally, as the flames wink out, leaving behind a bed of embers that radiates waves of red and orange, the musicians rest and the tribal elders begin the *doroq*, telling tales of the home they left behind in days beyond memory. Time upon time they recount these same stories. I am sure the children hear them even in their dreams, so the words will never be lost, although their subject may never be found.

I have heard many Vistani legends, some translated by a Vistana youth who whispered in my ear while the elder spoke in the *patterna*, their curious "patchwork" language. The stories are masterpieces of folklore, lovely and varied, yet I have come to perceive common threads among them, in addition to their focus upon a lost homeland.

Most significant of these threads is the notion that the Vistani have been severed from their roots for some crime committed against the gods or some other superior being. Almost as important is the corollary idea which postulates that those who exiled the Vistani were flawed themselves, if not evil altogether. Such myths explain much about the attitudes and demeanor of the Vistani, who are at once a contrite and defiant race. Stained by some primordial failing, they are nonetheless scornful of those who judge them, for in their mythos, the judges are certainly no better. It is to these conflicting influences in their history that the Vistani attribute their dread power to lay curses.

The unique skills celebrated in legend variants essentially define each "nation" of Vistani peoples. I use the term nation with hesitation, knowing it conjures in the reader images of land ownership and settlement. I prefer *tasques*, the term the Vistani use among themselves, to designate cultural and familial separation. Chapter Three describes in great detail the three *tasques* that wander this land of ours, and the distinctive tribes within them, but at this point I shall only name them. The *tasques* are the Kaldresh (CALL dresh), providers of services; the Boemians (boh AY me anz), the entertainers; and the Manusa (mah NEW sah), the workers of arcane powers.

The final universal motif in Vistani folklore is an immense sadness which belies their often idyllic lifestyle. Since I am not "of the blood," as they say, I cannot ever fully comprehend this internal dichotomy. A Vistana is characterized by self-imposed nomadism, yet beneath this veneer of complete freedom lies a perplexed yearning for something which can never be. Quite often, we *giorgios* detect a faraway look in Vistani eyes, and attribute it to vision that somehow transcends our own. I rather suspect they are forever preoccupied with questions that pierce them to the heart, and to which they have no answers.

It would be a simple thing to fill the pages of this book with captivating Vistani legends, but I have chosen the

following three myths to document the points I have made above.

The Vanquished Conqueror

The tale of a great subjugator who led the Vistani far from their homes, only to abandon them to fate—this story is eloquently recited with only slight variations by the Kamii, Equaar, and Vatraska tribes, which are all members of the Kaldresh *tasque*. The Vistani were not soldiers—indeed, no Vistana I have ever met accounted himself a warrior—but rather smiths, animal handlers, and healers, on which a far-ranging army depends. In this tale, their "crime" was following a failed champion, for which they were stranded far from their native land. Cut off from the way back by spiteful *giorgios*, they wander, forlorn and hungry, in search of a new path to the "home forge."

Of particular interest in the following myth is the name of the conqueror: Vistan, from which the Kaldresh derive the name given to them by *giorgios*. I asked one Vatraska captain (not "chief") if his tribe accepted or rejected the term Vistani, and he answered, "The ignorant know not how to address their betters, and there is little profit in correcting them."

Note that bracketed additions are necessary when translating the Vistani *patterna*, as much of that language is composed of concepts which have no direct translation into other tongues. See my notes in Chapter Two for examples.

The Tale of Vistan

Vistan was not our king, nor was he our enemy, but his ambition was great and his army mighty. Westward he marched before thousands of legions, to conquer the world and make it his own.

*Vistan was not our king, nor was he our enemy, but his [resources] were great and his army well provisioned. Westward we followed him, to forge his weapons (*or "shoe his horses," or "heal his wounded," depending on the tribe telling the story*).*

Vistan was not our king, nor was he our enemy. His cause was not ours, nor were his spoils of war, yet his defeat was thrust upon us. In the land called Transyl, the conqueror was crushed by warriors of a nameless god, and all his legions were made slaves.

We were not, ourselves, brought into bondage, for Vistan was not our king, but neither were we allowed to return to the home forge, for the Transylites decreed that none should return with word of what had befallen Vistan and his armies. "Vistani" they named us, and made us [beggars], and promised they would murder us if our vardos ever faced east.

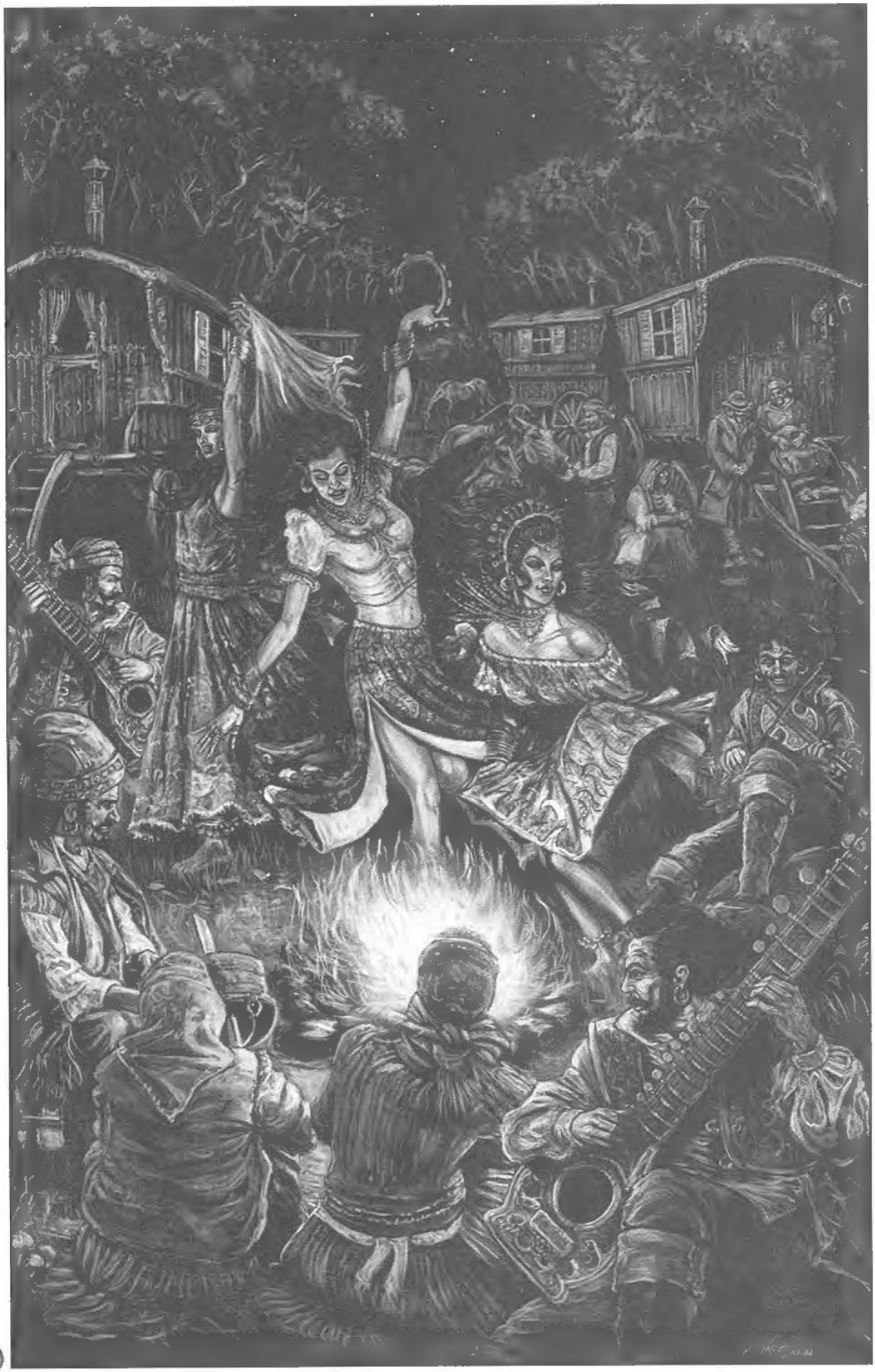
Then Kaldresh rose among us and spoke of a vision which taught him that the world was round, and he promised we should find the home forge if we continued moving always west.

Vistan was not our king, nor was he our enemy, yet forever we bear his name and his fate, for the world is truly flat, and we shall never see our homeland again.

As an interesting aside, the Zarovan tribe (of the Manusa *tasque*) tells a variant of this myth in which a great warrior by the name of Strahd (presumably an ancestor of Barovia's Lord Zarovich) actually conquered the world, but he would not give the Vistani a place in it because they had never sworn allegiance to him. In this case, however, the Vistani were forever trapped within Strahd's new realm, never to see their beloved home forge again.

The Forlorn Wanderer

The Naiat and Corvara tribes, which both identify themselves as members of the Boem *tasque*, are perhaps the most self-pitying of the Vistani peoples. In the privacy of their camps, there is a sour bitterness in the tone of their voices, which scorns the world and flouts authority. When they engage in the *prastonata*, dancing for their own entertainment, the music and choreography are tempestuous, filled with barely constrained rage and heart-rending anguish. Similarly, their tales are dark and tragic, as if glory itself were but a flickering pinpoint of light in a sea of black, roiling muck.



The song of the forlorn wanderer, commonly called "The Splintering" among the Boemians, is as woeful a parable as I have ever heard. Its rhythms and intonations in the *patterna* are reminiscent of the Vistani violin, with strains that pierce the spirit and evoke tears with the silver clarity of their mournful note. I find it ironic in the extreme that the Boemians are entertainers, engendering mirth and festivities as they travel; their lore is anything but cheerful.

The Splintering

Why do you [wander], O maker of music?
Why do your strings weep?
Why do you starve?
Because I have no home.
Because I have no hope.
Because I have no [harvest] to reap.
Where are your roots, O [wandering] slave?
Where are your ancestors?
Where are your gardens of plenty?

Torn from the soil.
Torn from the memory.
Torn from the feeble hands of my children.

How can this be, O tearful wretch?
How can this happen?
How can this go on?
Because I [murdered] my friend.
Because I [murdered] my comfort.
Because I [murdered] my place in the sun.

Why did you do this, O miserable one?
Why did you [murder]?
Why did you [kill] one you called friend?

He stole my true love.
He stole my own heart.
He stole my only reason to live.

What will you do, O cursed fool?
What will you suffer?
What will you do to make amends?

Nothing but [wander].
Nothing but starve.
Nothing but play my melancholy violin.

When will it end, O pitiable fetch?
When will it rest?
When will it all be over for you?

Never, never, never, never, never . . .

Of all the Vistani, members of the Boem *tasque* are most prone to lash out at the world, for they are bitter over their lot, even though they would not accept another lifestyle. The Boemians are largely responsible for the Vistani reputation of being thieves and cutthroats, if any such infamy is deserved. In particular, the families of the Corvara tribe are known as vendors of poison, confidence racketeers, and smugglers. If a person desires to acquire certain objects and services of little interest or use to respectable folk—spying, forbidden lore, evil potions, skeleton keys, and so forth—it is common knowledge that the Corvara know where such commodities may be located, and such is their bitterness toward life that no sense of morality stays their hands.

I must momentarily pause and submit that my opinions in this particular subject may be biased: The Radanavich family that stole my son belonged to the Corvara tribe.

The Spiteful Gods

The Manusa *tasque*, including the Canjar and Zarovan tribes, are easily the most willful of the Vistani. Although Manusa lore also bemoans the Vistani fate to wander the world, it embraces that fate with a great deal more enthusiasm than do stories told by other *tasques*. An unquenchable courage pervades Manusa legends, and a tenacity which would defy the powers that rule the universe.

"The War for All Time" pits the Vistani not against the rest of the world, but against all beings in the universe, be they mortal or divine. Having learned secrets that cannot be unlearned, the Vistani find themselves exiles in every world. Ultimately they emerge victorious, though, for they have learned to relish the new life thrust upon them, and they retain those powers that elevate them above other mortals.

The War for All Time

In peace and joy, all mortals lived among the gods, in a land of eternal light above the void. Together they

shared a love of creation. Together they made the universe, in which to dance the prastonata and [multiply]. The gods created all the lands, while mortals forged many an [artifice] with which to tend them.

But the gods reserved the creation of time to themselves, saying it was not a mortal's lot to have power over the past and future, but only to live in the present. Mortals were content with that lot, for the universe held everything they ever needed to live in peace and joy.

Out of the [void] came dark powers, the shadows of the gods, who whispered in mortals' ears, telling them they would be gods themselves if they controlled the past and the future. They inflamed mortals' hearts with visions of power, and made them fearful of the gods, fearful of their lack of control over time. At last, the mortals and the dark powers joined to make war against the gods for all time. Only Manusa, mother of our tasque, defied her mortal kind and stood with the gods.

Though the mortals and the shadows of the gods lacked the power to overthrow the gods, their destruction across the universe was terrible, which smote the gods to their hearts. In the end, the gods enabled Manusa to see the past and the future, that she might walk among the mortals and forecast the doom of their creation, and the end of the universe.

Then the mortals were ashamed. Then they rejected the whisperings of the dark powers. They begged forgiveness of the gods, and the dark powers were driven back to the [void].

When peace and joy returned to the land of eternal light, the gods regretted telling the secrets of time to Manusa, but they could not take back what had been freely given. So they joined with the mortals and drove Manusa from the land, cast her into the [void], and gave her to the dark powers who clamored for revenge.

But Manusa would not give up. Manusa would not die. Manusa wandered in the [void] alone, fearless of all beings, for she could see the future, and she foresaw that the gods and mortals would not [coexist] forever. Manusa saw that the spiteful gods would eventually cast all mortals from the land of eternal light, and abandon them in the universe they had created, and she laughed at the miserable fate of both gods and mortals.

We are the children of Manusa! We are neither mortal nor divine. We are wanderers in the world and through the [void]. We are unknown to mortals and unfettered by gods. We are merchants on the road of time, selling the past to gods and the future to mortals.

We are the children of Manusa!

To which all the tribe cries "*Koorah!*" meaning "Utterly true!" Those who hold tankards drain them, and music and dancing begin anew, invigorated by the tale. Of all Vistani lore, I find this legend most fascinating, an allegory of humanity itself. The Manusa are both frightening and alluring, personifying the mystique that all Vistani possess.

If the Dungeon Master intends to allow heroes to interact with Vistani beyond a simple fortune-telling scenario, the next step might be allowing the party to spend the night in a Vistani encampment, so that they witness dancing around the campfire and the recounting of Vistani legends. The *prastonata* and subsequent *doroq* are integral parts of this highly atmospheric experience. Incorporating Vistani even further into the adventure, the Dungeon Master might wish to hide information important to the plot within the folds of a fascinating encounter interrupting these Vistani rituals. Any number of events can occur in the midst of this scenario: Undead may encroach on the camp, one or more members of the party may be drawn aside for fortune-telling or exchange of information, or perhaps the Vistani might take advantage of the unexpected intimacy to rob the heroes.

In all the endless road you tread
There's nothing but the night.

–Alfred Edward Housman
"A Shropshire Lad"

Chapter Two: Vistani Life

In spite of isolationist tendencies, there remain innumerable observable similarities in Vistani lifestyles which bind all the *tasques* together as a single people. It is to these points I direct the reader's attention in this chapter, beginning with broad generalizations. They all own the name "Vistani," of course, a word in their *patterna* that translates as "human" or "thinking creature." They also share an ability to generate thick fog and travel through it to distant realms (*mist navigation*; see Chapter Five). All Vistani practice fortune-telling to some extent, and all of them can invoke the *evil eye* (see Chapter Four). And, of course, all Vistani are possessed of the dread power to lay curses on other people in the most terrible ways (see Chapter Four).

One can also easily infer all Vistani are related culturally if one notes the common presence of various belongings. For example, the construction of their wagons, called *vardos,* is remarkably similar from tribe to tribe, and virtually all of them use such trappings as the *tarokka* cards of fate.

It is possible that all these similarities occur not because the Vistani are, at their base, the same people, but because they all share they same lifestyle. They have no doubt shared and adopted one another's daily habits through centuries of crossed paths, gravitating toward the most efficient way to live as they all do. Hence, the round-topped *vardo* is the wagon design most serviceable to their daily lives, the nightly campfire is the best place to pass on their culture to future generations, and so forth.

As to the commonality of their arcane powers—the ability to curse, cast fortunes, and so on—my only guess (aside from the obvious one, that they are indeed interrelated) is an ironic one: Universal rejection by *giorgios* has brought them closer together, and they have combined their knowledge for mutual protection, giving us true cause to fear them.

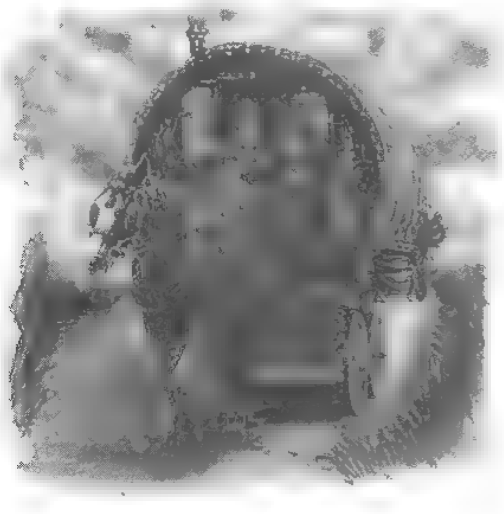
A hard heart within my breast reinforced the wall between Arturi Radanavich and myself during our first two weeks on the road, as we sought first contact with the Vistani. The outcast and I spoke very little or not at all, adopting the reserved familiarity of people who are forced together, but are sure they will never see one another again.

It was not until we approached a Kamii tribe, late one afternoon, that the wall finally cracked. After I assured the captain and raunie (female leader) of my good intentions, the Vistani cautiously agreed to grant me the boon of spending a night in their encampment. Suddenly, Arturi was my ambassador, my translator, my cultural interpreter. I began to understand and appreciate what he was doing, gently nudging the Kamii and me toward each other, urging us to hold in check our fears. He became a source of moral support as I trembled and he asked my first few questions of his former people, granting reassurance that he would prevent misunderstandings and subsequent hostilities.

Then, when the sun set and the captain sparked to life what would grow into a merry bonfire, Arturi suddenly stood and walked toward the deepening woods. I struggled to my own feet and asked where he was going.

He replied simply, "The sun is going down."

"You will not stay the night here?"



"No," said a Vistana beside me. "He is outcast."

At that moment more than any other, the full weight of my curse—spoken all those years ago—smote my heart like an unholy mace. Before I could plead for him, Arturi held up his hand to me in a gesture of silence. He smiled sadly, turned, and disappeared into the forest.

—From the private journal of
Dr. Van Richten

Rituals

Almost every aspect of Vistani culture is steeped in ritual, from the way they sprinkle herbs into their cooking pots in a triangular motion (symbolizing the path of nourishment—from the ground, to the plant, to the body, to the ground) to the *prastonata* and the *doroq*. Rituals sustain the culture of a tribe when various caravans go their separate ways, binding them together although they may remain apart for months and years.

In the pages that follow, my remarks are generalized from one or two occasions of contact; I have had neither the time nor the opportunity to study any tribe until I had observed all their customs. Obviously, so small a sample renders suspect all that I have to report. Nevertheless, I believe my extrapolations create a fairly complete picture of the Vistani, and one by which the reader may achieve a basic level of understanding.

Indeed, the highly ritualized customs of the Vistani have allowed me to note certain similarities between one tribe and the next, which in turn demonstrate similarities to a third, and so on. By establishing a chain of common practices, I have proceeded to the hypothesis that most or all Vistani share most or all rituals of which I shall write. Of course, Arturi has reinforced my theories with corroborating testimony in many cases.

Unfortunately, much of Vistani culture remains a mystery to us *giorgios* because the origins of their rituals are so ancient. Further, for every noticeable convention, dozens of subtler customs are woven into their daily lives. I have not begun to catalogue these traits, and I doubt I ever shall.

> If the Dungeon Master wishes to create a tribe of Vistani, the information presented in this and subsequent chapters can be used as a reference. Additional, original traits are encouraged as well, as the Vistani should remain forever enigmatic to heroes. Having met one tribe, a party of adventurers should not feel able to claim comprehensive knowledge of these people.

Setting and Striking Camp

One universal ritual is that of setting and striking camp. Sometimes the proper place to settle for the night is carefully scouted, and sometimes it is spontaneously chosen, but in either case the male leader of the caravan (called the captain) paces out the dimensions of the site, then finds its center and declares, "*Kir-yahg*," which loosely translates from the *patterna* as "Make fire," although the command is strictly metaphorical. If possible, he does not move from his position until all *vardos*, animals, and tribesmen have proceeded to points designated with a gesture of his first two fingers.

When the caravan has come to rest, the female leader (called the *raunie*) joins

the captain at the center of camp and confirms his choice. According to Arturi, there are rare cases when a *raunie* objects to a site, usually for mystical reasons, in which case the tribe must move on. Barring this happenstance, the *raunie* cries, "*Kir-yahg*," and the setting of camp proceeds.

When the time comes to depart the area and the caravan is packed up, the captain inspects the camp to be sure it has been properly cleared of all refuse and other objects, then places his hand upon the spot where the ashes of the fire pit have been buried, proving to the *raunie* that the fire has been completely extinguished. He moves to the center of camp, declares, "*Dya-yahg*" ("Leave the fire"), then leads the caravan away.

The Prastonata

One of the most vivid images a *giorgio* may have of a Vistani encampment is the ritual dancing around the fire, the *prastonata*. This ritual precedes the *doroq*, the telling of stories and legends. Indeed, the

Prastonata

If the heroes are fortunate enough to be granted the privilege of spending the night with a Vistani caravan, do not gloss over the activities under the stars. Make it an event to remember, for such entertainment should be all but unheard of among *giorgios*. If the heroes are lucky, they may have the chance to participate in a Vistani campout once or twice during the current campaign.

After dinner, set the scene with a description such as the following text: *By the time the wooden dinner platters have been wiped (not washed) and put away, the sun has sunk beneath the horizon and stars have begun to brighten in the eastern sky. All across the domain, people are locking their doors, bolting their shutters, and huddling under their covers, but the Vistani are only beginning to come out of their shells.*

"Nightfall," lisps a toothless old codger, "is the finest hour of the day." A rather odd comment, considering the horrible things that come out in the dark, here in [kingdom's name].

With an ease that would amaze a ranger, the captain sparks a fire to life in minutes, using nothing but a flint block and kindling. The children have collected wood since camp was set, and now they begin to feed the flames, laughing merrily and chatting with each other in their colorful tongue.

One by one, the Vistani finish their final tasks of the day and join the growing circle around the fire. Someone produces a violin. After tuning the strings, he begins to ply his bow, striking up a spirited melody.

If the Dungeon Master has access to recordings of Gypsy violin music, this can be played (softly!) in the background as the Dungeon Master continues with the description of the scene.

Soon, the Vistani are clapping and singing. A beautiful young girl rises and begins to dance around the fire, shaking a tambourine to the rhythm of the music. She spins and twirls her skirt round and round, until you are dizzy just watching her. Suddenly, she comes to a stop before your party. Gently she sways before you, the slightest trace of a smile on her lips.

"Who will dance with Gitana?" asks a nearby man. "Hers is a rare invitation indeed!"

If any adventurer accepts the invitation, have the player make a Dexterity check with a –2 penalty unless that character has the Dancing proficiency (resulting in no penalty). Success indicates that the *giorgio* acquitted himself well, perhaps amusing the Vistani in the process. Such an accomplishment gives the tribesmen a favorable disposition toward the character. Vistani tend to address the character when they speak to the party, and any plan to rob or otherwise harass the heroes is reconsidered. Add a +1 modifier to reaction rolls, if applicable.

dance tells a story of its own, not with gestures that represent words or ideas, but with movement and expressions that confer complex emotions.

If times are good for the caravan, the dancer, known as the *prastona*, moves wildly and freely, while stressful events engender anguished gestures, and mournful times yield sluggish, tortured steps. Until I had observed this ritual several times, I believed each *prastona* moved to the music which accom panied her. But I was mistaken; the dance drives the music, not the other way around. In her art, the *prastona* effectively embodies the feelings of the entire group, reinforcing their community, and dramatizing both poverty and prosperity in lithe beauty.

The *prastonata* is a living metaphor for the Vistani, as its constant, flowing, hypnotic motion reflects the life of these people, who never stay long enough to call any one place home. There is hardly a pause in a *prastona*'s dance on which a viewer may seize before it melts away into a turn and a flurry of hair, from the moment she poses for the first note of the violin, to the final twirl and collapse to the ground. But in those momentary glimpses of stillness, her image burns into one's mind, and her depthless, black eyes pierce one's dreams for the remainder of the night.

The Doroq

Once the *prastonata* has concluded, the musicians retire and the time for telling legends arrives. I have already recounted the genesis myths of the three *tasques*, but there are many more tales to tell, stories of love, heroism, tragedy, time, and countless other subjects. The Vistani tell them with a flair that would put a Kartakan bard to shame. Often, since my visits with the Vistani, have I sat by my own little fire at home and regaled a guest with the *doroq*. Perhaps I shall someday write up these legends, and publish them as leavening for my previous, grimmer works.

The Vistani relish their stories, and various caravans, tribes, and even *tasques* tell the same legend with virtually no discrepancies between them! The *tasques* know each others' fables as well, and they sometimes debate the faults and merits of another tribe's stories over a bed of dying embers. They also appreciate the allegories of *giorgios*. I was both surprised and delighted by a warm reception when I told them the sad tale of Emil Bollenbach, a former asistant of mine whose twisted mind turned to evil. It was during those late nights, under a

Doroq

When the players finish roleplaying the *prastonata*, read the legend appropriate to the *tasque* with whom the heroes are staying. The Dungeon Master can require any character with the Ancient Languages proficiency to make a check to understand the Vistani *patterna*; with a successful result, give that player a copy of the legend and allow him to "translate" the words as a Vistana "speaks" them.

Heroes who react respectfully to the legend should be awarded a +1 bonus to reaction checks (not cumulative with any other bonuses); as well, the Vistani perform readings and otherwise provide information free of charge. On the other hand, heroes who make light of the event receive –2 penalties to all subsequent reaction checks (which are cumulative with any other penalties), and the Vistani charge them dearly for any services rendered. Furthermore, the Vistani might offer false information. If the adventurers are particularly rude, they are summarily tossed out of the protective circle of the camp as if they had never been invited to stay the night.

Assuming that no breaches of protocol occur, invite the heroes to tell a story. An anecdote, a recounting of an adventure, or even a good joke will do, but ideally the performance should be related to the campaign in some way. Reward those who entertain the group with experience points. (The Vistani mock any known bard who refuses to rise to the occasion.)

pitch-black sky shot with glistening specks of white, that I felt closest to the Vistani. Fearless of the brooding night around us, we gazed content into the hypnotic glow of the fire. Sharing its ample warmth and security, we listened to one another's stories with hearts and minds. The wall between the Vistani and myself never came down, but during those nights we could at least talk with each other across the barrier.

Moon Rituals

Substantial evidence exists to suggest that the moon is a body of great power. Consider its influence upon lycanthropes, its sway over madmen, even its effect upon young lovers. Time itself is measured in cycles—in days and weeks and months—all corresponding to the sun and moon. Indeed, the word "month" is a derivation of the word "moon."

But the moon is also natural, and all power associated with it is similarly so. The moon is a telling factor in the quest to understand the Vistani. Its endlessly repetitive cycles mirror the rituals that define Vistani life, so of course the moon is a sacred part of their culture.

Typically, the Vistani spend all three days of the full moon away from *giorgio* population centers. During this time they engage in moon rituals. Lost travelers may happen upon a Vistani camp during the full moon, which ironically is the best time to pass among them: Rather than turn *giorgios* away at this important time, the Vistani prefer to keep strangers where they can be monitored.

Fulltide

The three days the moon is in full phase are called Fulltide. During this time the Vistani seek to bring all matters in their lives to fruition. When a Vistana makes a promise to do something, she often punctuates the pledge by declaring "*Lunadi*," meaning literally "By the moon" and figuratively "It shall be done." In essence, she is promising the task will be done before the moon is full, although the actual terms of the agreement may be altogether different. "*Lunadi*" is often a figure of speech, like the *giorgio* habit of saying "I swear on my honor!" instead of "It is really true." The Vistani think in terms of completing as much business as possible before Fulltide, so they can begin new projects afterward. The full moon marks a small turning point in the lives of a people who otherwise do not pay much attention to the passage of time.

Magical undertakings typically come to a head with the full moon as well. A series of readings culminates at Fulltide, enchantments take effect, even curses have an increased chance to take hold of a victim. The Equaar create magical figurines that protect their herds while they engage in moon rituals, and the Canjar make moon jewelry, which takes its power directly from the light of the moon. Finally, Vistani marriages virtually always take place under Fulltide.

The Lunaset

During the three nights of Fulltide, the Vistani perform the *prastonata* and *doroq* as usual. On the third and last night, they also observe the Lunaset, a ritual that no outsider is allowed to attend. During this rite, the entire tribe files into the forest at midnight, when the moon is directly overhead. At dawn, as the moon sets, they reemerge from the darkness—haggard and

> "*Lunadi*" is a Vistana's way of agreeing to something, regardless of the time factor involved. It is a way to say "Okay."
>
> The natural inclination of a Vistani, however, is to designate Fulltide as the deadline for most agreements to be satisfied, if possible. This means that they are slightly reluctant to enter into business dealings just before the full moon, unless they can complete the tasks overnight. Also, when Vistani demand a service of adventurers, the heroes can expect to be given until next Fulltide to fulfill their end of the bargain. If the full moon passes before the heroes complete their mission, some Vistani tribes may refuse to honor the agreement, even if no harm was done by finishing late.

introspective—and go straight to bed to sleep until noon. When at last they rise, the Vistani seem as jovial as I have ever seen them.

What they do out there in the woods, unprotected from evil which walks the night, illuminated only by the blue light of the moon, I cannot guess and Arturi would never divulge. His refusal to explain carried a certain uneasiness, as if I would have been revolted by the rite.

I confess, the temptation to sneak after the tribe and spy did come upon me, but I could not bring myself to move. Too many noises rent the night, neither human nor entirely bestial, which terrified me and kept me close by the fire. The thought of discovery held me in my place as well, for I suspect what Vistani do during Lunaset is forbidden, and outsiders who look on it must surely be doomed.

Perhaps they renew their strange and myriad powers in some ancient and cryptic ceremony which must remain pure to work—that would be in keeping with the cyclical moon, and the purity of their bloodlines. Perhaps they have another form, like lycanthropes, rakshasa, and countless other creatures that stalk the domains, and they must periodically return to that natural shape to survive. Perhaps they go to parlay with evil powers, to treat with lords of these dark domains, to traffic with wicked beings that own the night. Perhaps you and I cannot imagine what dreadful activities pass under the full moon, deep in haunted forests, when *giorgios* are hiding under their blankets.

Festival

As I have mentioned, the Vistani arise at noon following the Lunaset, and they are typically in a very good temper. It is a day of rest for them, during which time they feast, play games, and simply relax. Any business deals which have previously been struck are resolved on this day, but no new negotiations may take place until the following day.

Throughout this book, the word "ritual" comes up repeatedly, and some readers may even say to themselves,

Lunaset

Giorgios who spend a night in a Vistani encampment during Lunaset are sternly admonished by their hosts to remain in camp, on pain of a curse. The Vistani then leave the heroes unguarded and disappear into the woods for the night. This is an extremely secretive time for the Vistani, and even evil supernatural powers conspire to protect it.

If the adventurers insist on seeking out a Vistani tribe during Lunaset, they are likely to encounter some uncommonly awful creatures from previously published RAVENLOFT products, such as from any *RAVENLOFT MONSTROUS COMPENDIUM Appendix*. The Dungeon Master can roll percentile dice once per turn and assign a 75% chance that a monster appears and attacks the group, selecting the monster as well. Check for new encounters even while the adventurers are engaged in combat.

In the meantime, the Dungeon Master must decide how much the heroes see of the Vistani, if anything. They might find that the Vistani run through the forest at full movement rates, unencumbered by undergrowth or darkness, never tiring, meeting one another and continuing on their separate ways before the heroes can catch up. Or the heroes might witness a small part of a secret ritual, only to have the entire tribe suddenly turn, look on them with baleful eyes, and utter a deadly curse.

The occasion of Lunaset provides an opportunity to reveal an important clue or answer an important adventure question, but it serves mostly as a physical manifestation of the mystery that surrounds the Vistani. There are few hard and fast rules to apply, because players must not be allowed to learn and depend on them. Dungeon Masters can use the rite any number of ways, but adventurers should always know that by spying on the Vistani in their most personal hour, they take a big risk.

"Here is yet another ritual," even when I do not mark it so myself. That is a good thing, for even if you do not know what the customs are, a sensitivity to their existence will open many doors to communication that might otherwise remain forever barred.

Tribal Organization

Dozens of individual caravans of Vistani drive their barrel-topped *vardos* through our world's domains. Each caravan is part of a larger tribe, but each is also an extended family wherein every member is directly related by blood kinship or marriage.

All Vistani are led by both a patriarch and a matriarch figure, whom I have already identified as the captain and the *raunie*. Each has respective duties and spheres of authority. Captain and *raunie* may be husband and wife, brother and sister, or even cousins, but they always share the family name. All caravan members are related to them, be they parents, offspring, siblings, cousins, or spouses.

The captain is the caravan master, responsible for maintaining the equipment, *vardos*, and animals. He supervises each setup and breakdown of camp, chooses the site and when to leave it (if not forced to move on), and delegates responsibilities for gathering wood, water, and food. When commerce arises with *giorgios*, some captains openly take charge and some remain aloof, but all important business decisions are the captain's alone.

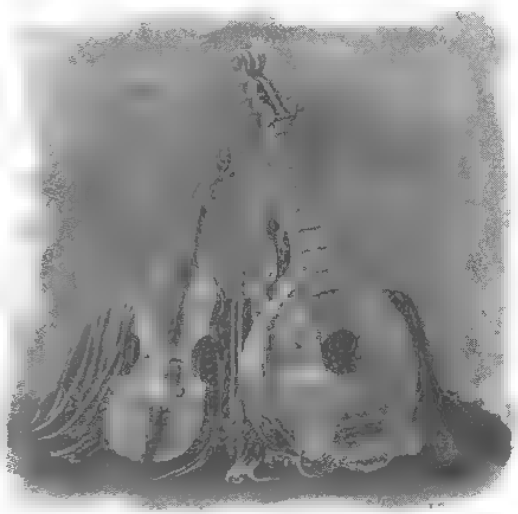
The *raunie*, often called *oma* by the younger members of the tribe, holds the highest authority in a Vistani tribe, however. When there are matters concerning the entire tribe, she is the one who presides over any discussion, and her decision is binding. The *raunie* sits in judgment of conflicts between members. Hers is the right to pronounce, and even inflict, punishment on transgressors. She is most often the treasurer of her people as well.

I do not believe there has to be a reason why Vistani are matriarchal, but reasons enough exist: As females are the givers of life, it is natural, among a culture of survivors in a hostile world, to accord them the mantle of leadership. Vistani women are astute judges of what is best for their people, well suited to assume authority in planning and negotiation with others. Of course, the fact that only Vistani women have powers of prescience elevates them to a status of great power. Besides, the captain is occupied with the rigors of day to day life on the open road, so it falls on the *raunie* to manage the less-physical necessities.

In any event, when a Vistani man and woman marry, he enters her family. He takes her name, joins his property to hers, and so on.

It is not necessarily a simple thing to identify the *raunie* or captain in a caravan. They are fiercely protected by the entire tribe. One defensive Vistani strategy when dealing with *giorgios* is to send forth false leaders. Another strategy lets one tribe member draw the danger on himself, while the rest of the tribe spirits the captain and *raunie* away.

If and when a caravan grows too large to support itself, if it can no longer feed its members, or if its size repeatedly becomes a threat to *giorgio* communities, the caravan splits in two. The *raunie* chooses a male and female who will lead the splinter tribe in a solemn ceremony, which no *giorgio*



may attend. (My knowledge of this rite comes from Arturi, of course.) Finally, after much revelry and not a few tears around the fireside, they sleep as one under the stars a last time, then each go their own way in the morning, crying, "*Endari-vitir!*" ("All paths converge!")

Adoption

When a *giorgio* endears himself to the Vistani, he is offered the honor of the blood rite. The ritual confers on him the status of a *giogoto* (jee oh GO toe), a *giorgio* who is "enlightened, yet not of the blood." The outsider may refuse the offer without penalty, but such opportunities are invaluably rare. One must weigh the advantage of allies among the Vistani against the possible repercussions from their numerous enemies, including the entire populations of some domains, and not a few of the domains' lords.

When the offer is made and accepted, the Vistana who sponsors the ritual stands face to face with he who is to become *giogoto*. He draws forth a knife and slices the left hand of the initiate with a single slash of the blade. He then opens his own palm and the two clasp bleeding hands. The Vistana wraps a sacred scarf purified by moonlight and some fey herbal tincture around the two members and says, "Hands bound, blood mingles. I cannot repay you for your act, but I will call you brother (sister)." While the tribe gathers round and chants, the two enter a dream state, and blood courses down their arms for several minutes.

When at last the two hands separate, each is covered with blood, but the wounds are miraculously healed. All that remains is a wide, purple scar which creases the palm, forever identifying the non-Vistana as a *giogoto*.

Exclusion

"A person is Vistani by right of birth." So say the proud people who wander homeless in our realms. One can never join their ranks, even if he travels with them for years. A non-Vistana can never be anything but a *giogoto*.

The *Giogoto*

An adventurer can be invited to take part in the blood rite and earn the status of *giogoto*, but not easily. The most likely circumstance is when a Vistana owes an adventurer a great debt that cannot be repaid. Perhaps the hero saved a Vistana's loved one, or shared a particularly dangerous moment with a Vistana and survived. Aiding a tribe through the course of adventuring is not, in itself, sufficient cause for induction. Often, only one member of a party of heroes performs such an extraordinary action as renders him or her worthy of invitation. The Dungeon Master must set the standard for the award.

Any Vistana can readily identify a *giogoto*'s "tribal affiliation" simply by touching the scarred palm and sensing its origins. That person can freely take shelter for a single night among any tribe of the *tasque* who labels him (while other *giorgios* must either pay or, more often, find their own accommodations).

A *giogoto* is never swindled or lied to, and he is often given more information than he asks for. The Dungeon Master can use such a relationship to create a mysterious sage adviser in a local domain, whom the heroes can occasionally consult for answers. Since the Dungeon Master decides if, when, and where the Vistani can be found, he controls the dissemination of information. In fact, seeking the tribe that respects a player's character, and can unravel an impenetrable puzzle, might be an interesting side adventure.

Giogotos are never treated as part of the tribe, and no sense of camaraderie develops. Rather, the *giogoto* feels "tolerated." Non-Vistani cannot engage in the Lunaset, nor learn the *evil eye*, among other things.

Vistani automatically gain *giogoto* status among other tribes of their *tasque*. A hero generated from a Vistani kit has a percentage chance to be treated as one as well; see the DUNGEON MASTER Appendix for this section. The Manusa *tasque* (see Chapter Three), however, never recognizes a *giogoto*.

Most *giogotos* are actually children who have run away from home and joined the Vistani. Because they understand a yearning for freedom, Vistani caravans readily take in young boys and girls of ages eight to sixteen. After a season or two, the Vistani make their way past the various towns where runaways joined them, and they send the wayward children home to whatever punishments or cries of joy await them. The Vistani are not in the habit of kidnapping babies or small children—my own tale of Erasmus notwithstanding—for such practices would poison their blood heritage as well as earn them many dire enemies.

The fact of the matter is, the Vistani fiercely defend their bloodlines because there is little else by which they might identify themselves. In a fluid world like theirs, the only thing that runs true is the blood of their own families. Not even members of diverse *tasques* wed or breed. The Kaldresh and Boemians (see Chapter Three) do not intermarry, for example, and I do not think the Manusa marry or bear young at all. The exclusion of outsiders and the strict division of the *tasques* (see Chapter Three) preserves their sense of ethnicity, legitimizes their highly ritualized mythology, and—more practically—helps to protect rights of ownership in all matters, which is quite important to a people who carry everything they own, everywhere they go. Hence, even someone who is only ninety-nine percent full-blooded Vistani is regarded the equal of a man with nary a drop of Vistani blood in his veins. There is nothing spiteful or racist about the attitude; it is a cultural trait which has allowed them to survive in a hostile world for centuries.

Everyday Life

Unfortunately, I have had too little time among the Vistani to discuss their day-to-day life in any depth. Chapter Three describes each tribe of each *tasque* in as much detail as I could muster, but here my objective is to discuss what I think is common to most or all of them. Exceptions are frequent, especially among the strange and reclusive Manusa.

Living off the Land

Our world is bountiful in most of its parts. With the possible exception of Keening, the Shadow Rift is the only thoroughly inhospitable place in the land. Certainly, danger and death are rife in the night, yet both the people and the land itself are ever more robust for that unhappy fact. The woods quickly ripen with fruit and berries, the stock fattens sooner, and the people—Vistani and otherwise—are born survivors.

Food and Cooking

The nomadic Vistani cannot grow crops, but they know the flora of the forest well, gathering wild turnips, mushrooms, berries, wild garlic, and soft roots. Their command of herbal lore rivals my own, and there is probably much they could teach me, were I more welcome among them. They are deft with spices. They are not hunters, but they often drive herd animals or net fish, so meat is a staple of their diet.

Since they cook exclusively over an open fire, soups, stews, and other kettle dishes make up the bulk of their repast. Vistani also like to skewer bits of meat on sharpened sticks and roast them in the flames—hedgehog is a particular favorite. One might think nomads eat poorly, but most of their day is devoted to gathering food and finding a place to sleep. The Vistani are more than proficient at both tasks. Some are able poachers to boot.

Water is the common drink of the Vistani, not wine or brewed potables. Although they sometimes serve drink to *giorgios* when conducting business with them, they themselves remain absolutely lucid and alert at all times. Only during solemn occasions such as weddings and funerals do they drink a little dry berry wine, full of body and bouquet, called *bourdad.*

> All Vistani can identify plants, animals, and pure water with perfect accuracy. They also possess the Herbalism nonweapon proficiency.

Fire Starting

As I have stated, the captain supervises the gathering of firewood as his caravan sets up camp. He dictates one of a half-dozen methods of arranging the wood inside the stones. He directs the use of a fire pit if the tribe is large; if the tribe is small, he lays the fire himself. Unless the *raunie* commands otherwise, he chooses when the fire is lit. He ignites the kindling, or at least stands by while it is done. It is all ritual; Vistani legends frequently mention the fire starter, essentially sanctifying the role.

I have no idea how he does it, but a Vistana captain can start a fire with wet seaweed and a piece of flint. Let it rain, let it snow, let the wind howl in the pit; he will have the fire going momentarily. No one tried to hide the method from me. I stood and watched captains spark a blaze in visit after visit, under the gamut of skies. There is no secret—they just do it. Furthermore, Arturi insists that all Vistani can readily build a fire, not just the captains. Even outcasts retain the skill, as he proved over the course of several months.

> A Vistana can start a fire with anything that would burn if it were dry. Provided that proper materials are at hand, it takes a Vistana 1d6+4 rounds to build a fire with easily burned fuel, and 1d6+10 rounds to ignite rain-soaked mulch or the like. No proficiency roll is necessary.

Love and Marriage

Privacy is a sacred right to these nomadic people. They respect the individuality of each tribal member in a most fundamental sense. While each contributes wholeheartedly to the needs of the whole tribe, he is in turn accorded complete autonomy. A Vistana may come and go as he pleases; better, he can remain "alone" even in the presence of other tribesmen. To indicate he wants solitude, a Vistana clasps his hands before him. As long as he continues the gesture, the tribe simply ignores him as if he were not there. Nothing but an emergency can induce them to speak to him. But I digress.

My point is that, among the Vistani, love is a personal matter in the extreme. Arturi has told me all I know of his people's love rituals. If not for him, I might not have admitted they were capable of love, such was my prejudice. But of course, that wondrous emotion is as important to Vistani as it is to any intelligent being.

Yet, spouses are less common than siblings in any caravan, and the Vistani do not multiply quickly. First, there are not many marriageable males and females among them all. Second, they cannot court as *giorgios* do, for eligible mates rarely dwell in the same caravan. Unless a boy and a girl who have grown up together are related only through marriage—an uncommon occurrence—they must seek love

> The impending marriage of two Vistani can create an interesting side adventure. As Vistani often trade in favors, a party of adventurers that needs their fortunes told might be asked to take part in the upcoming event in return.
>
> For example, the heroes can be sent to deliver an important message to the groom's caravan, presently several domains away. No one suspects that a darkling (first *Ravenloft Monstrous Compendium Appendix*), a former member of the bride's tribe, is out to cause havoc. He stalks the party, steals the message, tries to enlist the party's aid, or takes any other action the Dungeon Master dreams up. Or, perhaps the adventurers are sent on a dungeon crawl to retrieve a rare mushroom that is the primary ingredient in stuffing baked hedgehog, a traditional dish at the marriage feast.
>
> Heroes had best be on their best behavior when speaking of the marriage relationship and business relating to it. As Van Richten points out, the Vistani take love very seriously, and disrespect draws a curse of "embarrassing" strength.

during sporadic meetings with other caravans of their tribe. Thus, the ritual joining husband to wife is rare and quite treasured by the culture.

When love does occur, the parents of the prospective mates make inquiries of each other, to see if such an arrangement is possible and to discuss property rights. Next the children are formally asked if a match would please them. If the answer is yes on both parts, then plans for a marriage are forged in earnest.

Often the young lovers' caravans go their separate ways after the marriage agreement is struck, sometimes for months. During that time, both groups prepare to meet in the deepest forest on a full moon, share the ritual of setting camp, raise a bonfire, and bring the couple together. Without exception, as I have mentioned, the man and his property pass into the woman's family.

Death and Funeral Rites

A Vistana never dies in bed. In a land filled with death, the Vistani believe that they must shield their caravans from the taint of death. Ritualistically, they have expelled the grim reaper from their midst, and perhaps there is something more than superstition in those beliefs, for they sleep comfortably under the stars night after night, while the rest of us seek shelter behind bolted doors and shutters. I have no verifiable proof of this, but neither do I have any other means to explain this phenomenon.

In any event, a Vistana's last act is often that of walking away from his caravan. If he cannot manage to do so himself, he is aided by his closest relatives and friends, though they do not speak to or look at him after he requests to be taken into the woods. The rest of the tribe similarly pretends not to see the dying person leave. This custom is yet another example of the Vistani value of privacy. The tribes believe that if one sees a Vistana take his last breath, the newly deceased literally died of embarrassment rather than of whatever was killing him in the first place.

Vistani Geist

There is a 10% chance that an adventurer is haunted by a Vistana's ghost if the hero witnesses the sudden death of that Vistana. The likelihood rises to 50% if the hero had a chance to look away but failed to do so. If haunting occurs, the Vistana rises as a geist (see the *RAVENLOFT MONSTROUS COMPENDIUM Appendix III*, TSR #2153) that follows the adventurer everywhere.

The sight of a person with a ghost following him around elicits an interesting assortment of reactions in any setting. Most citizens will be frightened, and their intelligence and sophistication should determine their reactions. In any event, the character is not welcome anywhere he goes. Set up encounters in which the hero must explain himself, intimidate his contacts, or concoct some ruse—anything to avoid being chased away and possibly slain.

The geist itself grows increasingly bitter with its lot. The Dungeon Master is encouraged to be devious, allowing the creature to disappear only to make dramatic and horrifying appearances later, or to linger over the hero's shoulder and shake its head balefully whenever he tries to conduct business, and so forth.

The members of the tribe of the dead Vistana might seek revenge if the adventurer caused the death of the Vistana who haunts him, but they otherwise refuse to become involved.

Vistani geists can be retired in the same way all geists are destroyed: by casting *abjure*, *banishment*, *dismissal*, *holy word*, or *wish*. However, a Vistana geist is entitled to a saving throw vs. spell (using its former Hit Dice if full character statistics have not been specified) to resist, and a caster who fails to destroy the creature cannot try again, ever. If the hero makes amends, either by offering a convincing apology (Dungeon Master's call) or by performing some task set by the surviving tribe, then the geist can forgo the saving throw and pass on.

Further, the Vistani believe that one who dies in shame cannot leave this world. Hence, a dead Vistana reputedly follows a person who saw him die, unable to speak or do anything, until the offending voyeur dies. If a Vistana dies in battle or otherwise in the company of others, all other Vistani turn away and close their eyes, just for a moment.

On the other hand, the death of a *giorgio* does not bother them in the least.

Vistani Wakes

After a dying Vistana leaves the circle of the encampment, the *raunie* lights a small candle and places it in the window of her *vardo*; when the candle goes out (seemingly of its own volition), it is taken as an omen that the tribe member has died. Immediately after the extinguishing of the light, the entire tribe commences a terrible wailing. The men and women weep openly, sometimes yelling at the heavens, and even young children cry as if they had been lashed. As darkness falls, this grieving gives over to an eerie, rhythmic chanting. Strange shadows move in the trees, and sometimes the wind sighs like a ghostly violin, playing a heart-wrenching song in the darkness. The Vistani believe that this is the spirit of the departed, visiting his tribe once more before traveling onward.

I happened to be present among a tribe of Vatraska when one of them died from a disease which I suspected to be mummy rot. Despite their best efforts, the young woman could not be brought back from the great vault of the beyond, so with her last ounce of strength, she managed to get to her feet and stumble into the trees beyond the camp. No one except myself paid the least attention to her as she went. She fell loudly in the bushes, just out of sight, and it was undeniable that she failed to rise again, yet the Vistani took no notice of her.

Just a few minutes later, the votive in the *raunie*'s *vardo* went out, even though there was plenty of wax left and no wind to snuff it. Mourning commenced immediately.

That night, the wailing became a skin-prickling chant as the tribe gathered around a bonfire and systematically burned every personal belonging of the deceased. I sat aloof, unsure of my part in the proceedings, if any. From my remote position, it seemed that the smoke of the fire twirled and danced around the ring of stones that contained the blaze, and my imagination conjured into it the image of the dead Vistana. I fancied that she had come back to dance once more, at her own funeral, before passing away. Indeed, the whole tribe seemed to be watching the swirling smoke, too.

In the morning, I searched the brush where I had heard the young lady fall for the last time, but there was no body to be found.

Nomadism

The Vistani are, above all else, nomads. Nomadism literally defines their existence, so much so that a Vistana who ceases to wander loses all powers associated with his former people (see "Static Burn" in Chapter Five). In fact, no *tasque* considers him Vistani. He becomes *mortu* ("more TOO")—the closest translation is "undead," although the Vistani do not mean what you and I call undead. To the Vistani, life without movement is not living at all. Although no tribe would confirm it,

> Most *mortu* Vistani are purely tools of the Dungeon Master. Such a character can function as a *giogoto* who is an ally (or enemy) of the adventuring party, as a character with a secret past, as the focus of a side adventure wherein the *mortu* knows how to locate the Vistani (and may or may not be willing to do so), or in any number of other interesting scenarios where a character has deliberately chosen to leave the ranks of an exclusive and closed society.
>
> Some who are *mortu* may be used by players as heroes; however; see the Dungeon Master Appendix in this section for more information.

Arturi explained that all Vistani have a regular migratory pattern. The path might be limited to one domain, or it might stretch all the way across our realms. A caravan's route can be circular, crisscrossed, or even linear. The entire route, from one point to itself again, might be completed in several months or several years. However, it is always regular, always the same, at least by Arturi's report.

Dungeon Masters who have built a full RAVENLOFT campaign can sketch a map of the migration routes of every Vistani tribe present, but must not show these routes to the players. Discovering and charting the paths can provide an interesting challenge for the heroes, as well as a clever way to find the Vistani (although the nomads may not be pleased if they find out what's going on). As soon as they realize they are being scrutinized, the Vistani adopt a new path, at least until they are certain that *giorgios* no longer pursue them.

The Vardo

This quintessential part of Vistani culture actually does not appear in every single caravan in our realms. I have met both a tribe of Equaar (see Chapter Three) and one of Naiat (see also Chapter Three) neither of which owns a single wheel or a roof to mount over it. Nevertheless, the *vardo* is so widespread among Vistani that it is conspicuous in its absence. Even tribes I suspect do not physically move from place to place still occupy these rolling domiciles. Indeed, a *vardo* is a house, a shrine, and much, much more: A *vardo* is a symbol of rank, for rarely are there enough to house the entire caravan. It is a measure of wealth, and a possession in which to invest wealth. A *vardo* also represents commitment, for the owner or his subordinates must perform constant maintenance.

Even more important, it is a temple of privacy. And perhaps most vitally, a *vardo* is a repository of power. Within

its protected environment, a Vistana can safely fall into a trance, turn cards without fear of the wind, or possibly trap spirits to speak with them. Spell components can be manufactured. In short, ask any spellcaster about the importance of a secure place to work, and he'll tell you that magic demands it.

No Trace or Trail

It is monumentally difficult to tell if a Vistani caravan has crossed one's path. Even rangers are hard pressed to discover such a trail, let alone follow it. When the nomads break camp, they remove every trace of their occupation. They bury their bonfire ashes, then disguise the overturned earth with natural camouflage. They pick up every speck. Even the tracks of their *vardos* seem to blow away in an easy breeze.

This care is part of the ritual of striking camp, overseen by the captain himself. On a practical level, it preserves the locale for future encampments, and perhaps helps erase sour memories of any *giorgios* who wished them gone. On a more speculative note, it protects the Vistani from curses and other evil magic. They know personal possessions can be used to focus the *evil eye* (see Chapter Four), so they are meticulous in removing them. I visited the now-vacant site of a Vistani encampment which had been occupied only a few hours before,

and I could find nothing to prove the tribe had ever been there. I must confess I am at a total loss as to how they perform this feat; all I can do is insist that it is so.

> Like druids, who can pass through undergrowth without leaving a trail, the Vistani defy all attempts to track them. Even rangers cannot follow their paths. All Tracking attempts are made as if the Vistani deliberately attempt to hide their trail (–5 penalty).

Dark Neutrality

Are the Vistani evil? After hating them for over thirty years, my instinctive answer was yes. But now, having studied these many and diverse peoples, my ethical principles bid me amend that response to "Some are, some are not." Yet there is another possibility, one that my companion strenuously put forth on many a long hike under the sun.

Arturi insisted the Vistani are neither lawful nor unlawful, neither good nor evil. Their only philosophy reflects that of Nature itself, wherein a perfect balance of all things is the ideal. Like druids, these nomads neither initiate agendas nor oppose them. They seek harmony with their environment. Indeed, "*giorgio*" (which translates as "unnatural," lacking a better term) is the opposite of "Vistani" in the *patterna*.

Perhaps their "naturalness" accounts for the Vistani's herbal prowess, their affinity with animals, their skill at filling their bellies without farms to harvest, their ease under the stars, and their close association with the moon. Perhaps Nature is the wellspring of the fabled Vistani power over time. What is time but a natural progression, measured against nature's cycles seen in the rising and setting of the sun, the seasons, and all the rhythms of the world?

If neutrality is indeed the credo of the Vistani, still I submit that it is a decidedly dark shade of gray. Of course, such a qualification is tantamount to negation, for darkness is not the middle ground, but rather the opposite of light.

Focus not on the idea of balance. If one examines Nature with an objective eye, one finds it simple to conclude that darkness, though not balanced, is quite natural. We live in a world where goodness is ever preyed on by evil. The domains are like red widows, enthralling in their beauty, deadly in their embrace. Our world is often a dark place, so those who would commune with nature must be touched by darkness themselves.

In a sense, calling the Vistani "evil" by *giorgio* standards is comparable to calling quicksand diabolical, blight calculated, plague intentional. In a cruel world, it is apparently natural to be cruel as well. The wolf is a natural creature, and so is the Vistana.

> Most Vistani are true neutral in alignment, like druids, although individual caravans can be neutral good or neutral evil at the Dungeon Master's option.

Law and Justice

Vistani justice is called the *vishnadd* (VEESH nod), meaning "dark blade." A Vistana often cries "*Vishnadd!*" when he has exacted revenge or emerged victorious from any given situation, but in cases of dispute or accusation, the term takes its formal meaning. All Vistani consider the *vishnadd* deadly serious, and woe to him who scoffs or scorns it.

I witnessed the *vishnadd* thrice in my first few months of studying the Vistani. The first time was occasioned by a dispute of ownership among the Equaar, and the second occurred as the result of an accusation of disrespect among the Naiat. The third time was the night I met the Corvara—Arturi's relatives—the extended family of the tribe that had taken my son, and had died by my curse. They waited until the sun set and Arturi had been banished to

the night; then the *raunie* drew out an obsidian blade and called my name.

"I will kill you, if you do not face the *vishnadd*," whispered a large Vistana behind me, brandishing a shiny blade of his own. Instantly, cold sweat started across my brow and trickled down my back. Every nightmare about Vistani I had ever experienced sharpened into deathly clarity in my mind's eye.

"Approach Madame Vassaevich and hold out your open hand. Do not speak unless you are told to," instructed my menacing captor.

The *raunie* clutched my wrist with surprising strength and placed the tip of her dark blade against my palm. The cold edge bit into the tender center of my hand and I recoiled, but I could not break her grip.

"Please," I begged.

"Silence!" spat the *raunie*, driving the point deeper into my hand. I froze in shock, suddenly transfixed by her whitish eyes, which rolled back into her head. My tongue wagged, but my throat gave no sound to it.

"If you lie, I will know it, and summary punishment shall fall on you," said the old woman from her self-induced trance. "You are the murderer of my tribe, slaughterer of my blood, a deliverer unto death. Do you plead guilty or innocent to my charge? Speak."

I looked into the unseeing eyes of the *raunie* and opened my mouth to protest, to accuse them as they accused me, to sneer at their fantastical court. But what she had said was true, and I was horribly afraid.

"Guilty," I pled, echoed by a murmur that swept through the Corvara all around me.

"Tonight, you are the guest of Arturi Radanavich," continued Madame Vassaevich. "For his sake, we protect you from our justice. Tonight, we treat you with respect, but tomorrow you are our enemy once again.

"The curse of Firdusa Radanavich lies strong on you, Van Richten. Continue to live long and suffer!"

Madame Vassaevich released my wrist and relaxed her eyes, emerging from her trance. She looked on me and smiled kindly. Needless to say, I slept not a wink that night.

As my experience shows, when the *vishnadd* is convened, the *raunie* sits, resting her obsidian blade in her lap.

Vishnadd

If adventurers ever oppose or harm Vistani characters, any tribe of any *tasque* they meet can become suspicious. These suspicions culminate in the *vishnadd*. Only this ritual removes the stigma, and only if the adventurers are acquitted of or pay for their "crimes." If the heroes ever need Vistani help again, they almost certainly have to endure this ritual.

The *vishnadd* is convened when an accusation is made in the presence of the *raunie*. (Sometimes she makes the accusation herself.) A single character who represents the accused steps forward, as does one who represents the accuser; each identifies himself or herself. The involved parties then observe the ritual described by Van Richten. The *raunie* prompts *giorgios* if they do not understand what is happening. If an accused non-Vistana refuses to take part in the *vishnadd*, she is immediately ejected from the company of the tribe—by curse or other fell power if necessary—along with any and all comrades.

Obviously, the Dungeon Master is a judge to whom an adventurer cannot lie. If a character uses magical means to shield her thoughts, or influence the trial in any way, she must roll a saving throw vs. spell for each lie or deception, with failure indicating that the *raunie* penetrates the deception.

The *raunie* tolerates three "displays of disrespect" by a *giorgio*—speaking out of turn, making snide remarks, refusing to answer a question, or similar infractions—but only if the offending character allows her to inflict 1d8 points of damage upon her hand with the knife. On the fourth slip-up, the case is lost and judgment follows immediately.

Her eyes roll back white, and she enters a trancelike state. In this condition, she becomes judge, jury, and executioner. Her tribe believes she hears what they think and cannot be deceived, so they accept any action she takes without question.

In matters of dispute, both adversaries approach the *raunie*, stand before her, and offer their open hands. Neither may speak until she takes his hand in hers and places the point of the knife against the palm. She asks a question or bids him tell his grievance. Only then may he speak, though he can say anything he wishes; if either party answers out of turn, his case is summarily lost. There is nothing if not order in the court of the *vishnadd*.

After the *raunie* has heard each side and passed judgment, all differences are declared resolved. I was present at one proceeding wherein two Vistani argued bitterly over the ownership of a litter of puppies, and was amazed to see the adversaries embrace heartily moments after the *raunie* had awarded the whelps to the owner of the bitch, based on the fact that she was the better hunter. No trace of frustration or resentment darkened the loser's face, and soon he was bartering for the pick of the litter. Were a *giorgio* to enter into such an action and lose his claim, I am sure that he would be forced to leave the area at once.

Combat Resolutions

There are rare occasions when neither party has the better claim, and no judgment is possible. In such cases, the adversaries are invited to settle their differences through a feather-blade duel. Their weapons are pheasant feathers whose tips are dipped in an herbal poison. I was unable to ascertain all the ingredients, but one component is a lichen which gives off a faint phosphorescent glow.

> In play, both characters strip to the waist, removing both mundane and magical armor, and fight arena-style with feather-blades. Each hit is a "touch" that leaves a telltale phosphorescent glow. Also, each successful hit releases a dose of contact poison, such that the victim must make a saving throw vs. paralyzation. After three failed saving throws, the victim succumbs to the contact poison and falls unconscious for 1d4 hours. The first character to fall unconscious or concede the match loses the judgment.

Acquittal

If a man is accused and acquitted, there is a feast in his honor. The victim of the trial is expected to raise his flagon and make a toast to peace and forgiveness. Then, when the tribe has gathered about the campfire and the *doroq* begins, he is allowed to tell his tale in full, showing how the misunderstanding occurred and why he is blameless. Curiously, he is not challenged if he tells a *feeshka*, a little lie as the Kartakans call it He is subtly encouraged with favorable reactions if he dramatizes the

> This same honor should be accorded to a hero who endures the *vishnadd* and is vindicated. A feast is a great chance for master roleplayers to take center stage and have some fun recalling the incident "in their own words." If a hero has been found innocent of all wrongdoing, he is accorded *giogoto* status.

account with melodramatic or even comic episodes. He has been found innocent of wrongdoing, after all, so the story might as well be interesting.

Punishment

In matters of guilt, punishment is immediate and not subject to appeal. The sentence imposed by a *raunie* is ungoverned by standards or degrees. As she passes judgment while in her trancelike state, it might be argued the *raunie* achieves what the Vistani consider a state of infallibility; whatever she decides is the right thing to do. Punishments run the gamut from a public flogging (mostly for young offenders) to exile (see later). Death penalties are possible, but unheard of.

Convicted *giorgios* are never subject to execution, but they can be cursed. They certainly will not be welcomed into any Vistani encampment in the future. If the transgressors plead for mercy and offer to make restitution, the *raunie* might accept, but her demands are not likely to be simple or pleasant.

Banishment

Vistani offenders may be banished from the tribe, condemned to walk alone in our realms. They become *mortu* if they seek and settle down in the company of *giorgios* in their misery. If the *raunie* judges that the convicted tribesman is no longer fit to live among his fellows, but deserves no worse punishment (as if that were not punishment enough!), then he is banished—they call it *karash* (ka ROSH). Such unfortunates are treated as if they were mere *giorgios*, which is torture to them. I know this all too well, for I unwittingly put the *karash* upon Arturi Radanavich when I cursed him long, long ago.

A guilty adventurer is subject to a curse whose strength depends on the seriousness of the offense against the Vistani. The punishment should fit the crime, and often an ideal punishment presents itself. If nothing obvious can be done, the Dungeon Master should see Chapter Five herein for curse ideas. If the Dungeon Master is unsure of how strong the curse should be, consult Chapter Twelve of *Domains of Dread*.

The only difference between characters who sue for clemency and those who defy the *raunie*'s judgment is that the former have an escape clause built into their curses, something like, "Unless you agree to my demands . . ."

"How will they receive us?" I asked the Vistana on our third day in search of a caravan.

"They will not dare to refuse you," answered Arturi. "All Vistani know you, Van Richten. You are part of the doroq, the tales they tell around the evening fire."

"Gracious! I shudder to think what they say."

"You will hear what they say soon enough, but you may be surprised to learn how you are depicted. Among some tribes your name is revered, for you have power over the Vistani which no giorgio has ever possessed. It is not loving reverence so much as grudging respect; even the most evil characters in a story may excite the imagination and gain sympathy."

"Will they not kill me, or at least wish to?"

"No! We are not murderers. Why should we attack you unless to defend our vardos and children? It is only your enduring malice that threatens the Vistani, and none of them would wish to enflame it with acts of aggression."

"And what of you, Arturi? Will all tribes open their arms to you, though you may not live among them?"

"No tribe will open its arms to me. I am the Outcast, for your curse follows me and descends upon all Vistani who tarry with me after dark."

—From the private journal of Dr. Van Richten

See the first *RAVENLOFT MONSTROUS COMPENDIUM Appendix* for a description of a darkling. This creature is a natural villain or plot complication in any adventure involving the Vistani. Whether the heroes are *giorgios* or *giogotos*, a darkling can plot against them. Its taste for cold revenge means that it is a good candidate to construct elaborate, twisted plots which can weave through the main quest of a campaign, or turn into a campaign of its own.

Exile

For heinous crimes, the offender is cast into the darkness, exiled, *shalach-ti* (SHA lok TEE). When this judgment is pronounced, the *vishnadd* knife is thrown out of the camp and the guilty party is ordered to go take it up. Since only a *raunie* may wield the *vishnadd*, the offender's grip on the obsidian blade at once soils its sacredness, and confirms his own exile. Now he is truly outside the *raunie*'s sphere of influence and protection.

Although the *raunie* takes no physical action to enforce her final command, Arturi tells me a Vistana offender almost always takes up—and keeps—the knife. Over time, he loses the balance, the naturalness, that the Vistani so prize, and becomes a darkling, an evil creature with a twisted mind.

I confess, that first night I saw Arturi Radanavich in my bedroom, I took him for a darkling. I now realize the depth and offensiveness of that error.

Communication

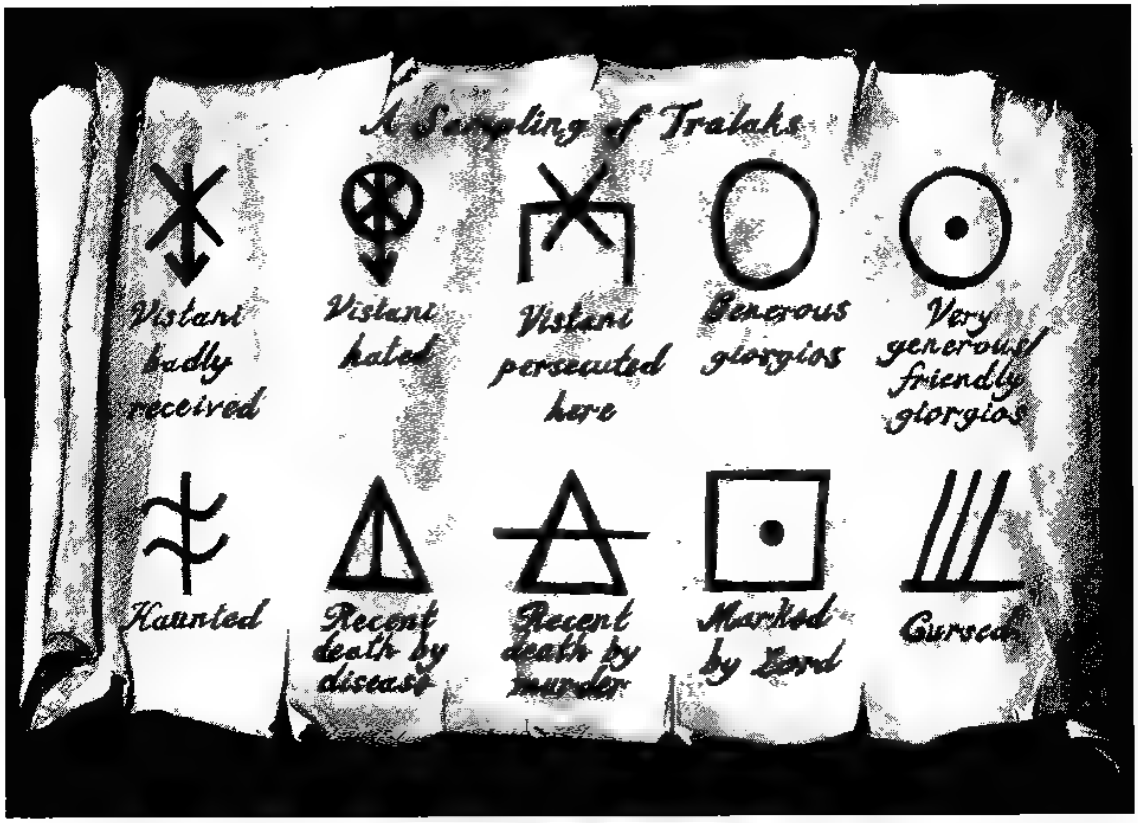
There are some scholars who claim that the Vistani have a pronounced accent. (I am frequently amused when I hear these words pronounced in an accent of

Creating a translation matrix for the *patterna* would require volumes of space. It would be like learning a language almost completely composed of slang. A hero attempting to comprehend a *patterna* conversation is like a second-year French student eavesdropping in Paris: The student picks up bits and pieces, but never the whole range of conversation.

To create this feeling in game play, the Dungeon Master can create a short list of offhand remarks that might be overheard and spontaneously translated. Some should be what the Vistani are actually saying ("I think the *giorgios* are dangerous, so we must—" and the rest makes no sense); some should be misinterpreted but seemingly understood ("Their hearts will make good stew," when they're actually saying "They will be warm to the heart after we feed them."); and, for a few laughs, some of them can be complete nonsense ("I'll bet the mage can hang from his toes in a *vardo*.").

As the adventurers overhear the *patterna*, allow them occasional chances to understand. As often as the Dungeon Master wishes (depending on the number of prepared translations), let the heroes make an Intelligence check: If it fails, they must continue to listen for 1d4 rounds before attempting another check; if it succeeds, they pick something up. The Dungeon Master then rolls percentile dice behind the screen, assigning a 50% that they hear one of the prepared phrases. Use this mechanic to disseminate information, true or false, as the adventure dictates.

The *patterna* allows the Vistani to talk with one another in the direct presence of the heroes without their being able to understand a word that's spoken. This can be annoying at the least and terrifying at the worst, depending on when and how it is employed. For example, if a seer turns a *tarokka* card, gasps, and says something incomprehensible in the *patterna*, the heroes probably beg for her to repeat herself in an understandable tongue. Instead, she mutters in the *patterna* and plays the next card, at which point she gasps louder and cries out aloud, shouting strange words that are repeated in alarm by other Vistani outside the *vardo*. A dramatic and diabolical Dungeon Master can tease his heroes with a wealth of information they cannot hope to understand.



their own.) To me, the Vistani do not vary the shape of words in any way that could be called an accent. What separates their special language from most others is the way it communicates.

As a people who travel in small numbers, spread across the domains, they have developed means of communication which is short and to the point. They do not often have the opportunity to linger on with other caravans of their tribe and *tasque*, so they tend to pack as much meaning into each syllable, each written character, even each gesture as they possibly can. While *giorgios* are constantly expanding their vocabularies to enhance expression, the Vistani find simple, subtle ways to say a thousand words.

The Patterna

It was my original intent to establish an extensive glossary for this strange language which is a mixture of local tongues, several humanoid dialects, and a unique slang, unspoken by any other race than the Vistani. Some of the more common terms and expressions can be found at the back of this treatise, but I found my attempt to catalogue a working vocabulary an exercise in futility, useless to anyone, including myself. This is because the *patterna* is conveyed more by context and intonation than by meaning or root words. Many ordinary words have no translations in the *patterna*. In fact, the Vistani dialect appropriates *giorgio* words when needed, without interrupting the rhythm of speech.

There are also many words and phrases in the *patterna* which have no parallels in any other language. Were I to utter a sentence of words based on their nearest common translation, a Vistana would hear only gibberish. Indeed, one or two such attempts on my part elicited uproarious laughter from them, as I had apparently hit on a combination which meant something ridiculous.

Tralaks

The written language of the Vistani is similarly image-intensive. While many

can write in other languages, letters are forever as foreign a notion as living in one place. A *tralak* (trah LAK) is like a symbol or sigil, expressing a whole idea with a single character. A Vistana does not write love letters or grocer's lists to another using *tralaks*. Rather, these characters are normally carved in wood or stone along trails and roads, just outside towns and villages, but hidden from immediate view. So many tralaks exist that long and detailed messages can be constructed that any Vistana can read and understand.

Tralaks can appear anywhere adventurers roam, carved into wood, painted on, scratched in, burned in, and so forth. Furthermore, *tralaks* can be claimed as a learned language (see the notes on Intelligence in the *Player's Handbook*). The Dungeon Master can create Vistani *tralak* characters and their translations for a hero who has learned to interpret them.

Tralaks can be used as lures, warnings, red herrings, clues, and simple messages, even if no one in the party can read them.

Paaterns

One who is wise in the ways of the Vistani can sometimes detect a *paatern* (pah TAYRN). These are personal communiqués—prearranged signals left behind by a Vistana who knows that another particular Vistana will pass by. A ranger or druid might note one if he were intently studying the area where it lay, though he would never find one "just in passing." Only a Vistana readily spots a *paatern*, and he must at least suspect where it will be.

Paaterns are subtle indeed. A knotted willow branch, a feather lodged in the bark of a tree, a dead branch wedged into the "V" of a dividing tree trunk, a narrow stone teetering over a gopher hole—all these things and more are used by the Vistani to pass along warnings and messages. Obviously, the range of messages is extremely limited, but I suspect that *paaterns* are mundane tools that make the Vistani appear more prescient than they truly are.

Paaterns are a more subtle form of *tralaks*, with more potentially sinister applications. A ranger or druid can recognize one on a roll of 1 or 2 on 1d6, if actively searching the area. A *mortu* hero (as per this section's Dungeon Master Appendix) may be able to spot *paaterns*, and all Vistani can instinctively and easily find them, provided they know to look.

Conclusion

I remained thoroughly uncomfortable among the Vistani, despite the frequency of my scattered days and nights among them, and I cannot suppress a pang of regret that I did not learn more about them. Certain of the topics I have addressed in this chapter are universal, I am sure: the rituals, the nomadism, the *patterna*. Most others I have observed in only a few caravans, and I cannot help but wonder if I am attributing my observations too broadly.

Furthermore, I begin to fear that perusing my thesis on the Vistani will lull the reader into a false sense of familiarity. Heaven forbid some blithe rogue should insinuate himself upon the tribes by demonstrating his knowledge of their customs and beliefs—or worse, some hapless farmer, smug in his narrow understanding, should offer grave offense, thinking he is acting out a familiar ritual! For all I have written and will write, these wandering peoples are as individualistic and mysterious as they appear to be when first you meet them. Their powers are fell, and you and I are not quite human to them. For your own sake, assume nothing!

The prophetic tribe with burning eyes
Took the road yesterday, carrying the children
On its back, or giving to their fierce appetites
The ever ready treasure of pendant breasts.
The men go on foot bearing their sparkling weapons
Along by the wagons in which their families huddle;
Scanning the sky with eyes dulled
By the sad regret for missing chimeras.
From the depths of his sandy retreat, the cricket
Watches them pass, redoubles his song;
Cybele, who loves them, redoubles her ventures,
Makes water flow from the cliff to flower the desert
Before these travellers, for whom is opened
The familiar empire of future darkness.

—Charles Baudelaire
"Gypsies on the Road"
(translated from "Bohémiens en voyage")

CHAPTER THREE: THE TASQUES

It never ceases to amaze me how apparently intelligent people call on simple generalities to define reality. Even more astounding, the words "When you've seen one, you've seen them all" comprise a ridiculous declaration of bravado among too many adventurers who should know better. I have personally found myself in the position of destroying a vampire who, only a week before, was a tough-talking man who claimed he needed nothing more than a stake and a mallet to be a hero. His belated discovery that not all vampires become comatose when the sun rises was but one of several fatal miscalculations.

Perhaps most people can be forgiven for failing to understand the subtle nuances among monsters, as experiences with them are either brief or lethal. However, nearly everyone has had some dealings with the Vistani, and they have certainly lived to talk about it. Hence, I am even more perplexed by self-assured, all-encompassing, and thoroughly erroneous attitudes toward them. I have found that the various natives of this land, including denizens of big cities such as Il Aluk, are quick to denounce the Vistani as practitioners of forbidden lore and dark pleasures, as thieves and allies of evil. In a sweeping gesture of condemnation, they confidently declare that "Vistani are all alike."

I believe this common misperception is based on the fact that the Vistani are a transient people. "Where are you from?" is a polite way of asking "Who are your people?" and the answer to that question can tell us a great deal about a stranger. For good or ill, we draw conclusions about a man based on our knowledge of the place from which he hails—often regardless of the actual length of time he has lived there!

For example, I have lived in Mordent for decades now, but I was born and raised on my family estate in Rivalis,

Darkon, so I am forever a Darkonian in my own eyes and others'. Were I originally from Nova Vaasa or some other domain, a new acquaintance would have a distinctly different impression of me on learning that.

As the Vistani are not from any particular place, we are deprived of a basic means of identification, which makes us feel uncomfortable. Thus, it is unfortunately all too natural to mistrust and fear the Vistani, to accept often unfounded accusations of sinister behavior, and to allow speculation to cement their undeserved notoriety. It becomes an easy thing to say that a Vistana is a Vistana, and an evil creature at that.

If these people are not merely traveling bands of organized swindlers or mystical creatures in league with the powers of darkness, then what exactly are they? Are they simply homeless people, or perhaps lost sheep? Are they fugitives on the run from who knows what, or seekers of some divine truth? It would be very convenient if the Vistani fit neatly into any of these categories, but the answer is not so elementary. They are all of the above, and none of them. They are one thing on Monday and another on Tuesday. They are above us, below us, and exactly our equals. We sneer at them, then seek them out, because they are everything we fear yet everything we want to be at the same time. I have already postulated that there is no way to truly understand them, and I reiterate that belief now. The best we can hope for is acceptance on both our parts and theirs.

Before continuing, let me pause and insert what has become an all too familiar disclaimer: As those who have read my various dissertations surely know, my observations are strictly that: observations. I cannot attest to the absolute veracity of anything I have learned about the Vistani. In fact, I am even less sure in my "knowledge" of them than I am about any other subjects of my research. While powerful monsters can have some unpredictable abilities, the Vistani are mysterious by nature. Little about them is immutable. Further, they have both the will and the ability to change. I can well imagine them reading this book—not to see their names in print, but to review adjustments they can adopt to confound "knowledgeable" scholars, simply because their inherent disposition requires them to defy identification.

Overview

There are, in fact, no less than three distinct groups of Vistani wandering the domains; as noted before, these are called *tasques*. Upon discovering that the nomads considered themselves divided into these large and diverse groups, my first inclination was to classify them as clans. After some study, I concluded that they are not actually linked by a common root kinship. Over the years (and perhaps centuries), I suspect there has been some intermingling of blood between the *tasques*, but each has managed to maintain a cultural individuality that merits acknowledgment, examination, and respect. Quite possibly each *tasque* comes from its own homeland, somewhere in the distant past. However, not even the Vistani know the names of those places, so I cannot say with impunity if this is the case.

Since the Vistani cannot be clearly classified by their physical origins, and because they are not given to mingling with outsiders, one must find other ways

to identify them if one cares to know exactly with whom one is dealing. Fortunately, those who know what to look for can do so at a glance, as each *tasque* has its own style of dress. There are other important differences as well. Each *tasque* exhibits its own attitudes and behaviors, its own system of beliefs about time and reality, and certain mystical powers that are tied to its individual culture.

The most important difference between the *tasques*, at least according to the Vistani themselves, lies in the services and crafts they provide—in their professions, if you will. Of course, a given *tasque* is not limited to a single skill; in fact, there is a strong possibility of finding one tribe practicing several of the trades which I shall shortly ascribe to others. As each *tasque* takes its identity from its primary craft, however, the services or wares that it produces are generally of higher quality than one can find anywhere else.

The Kaldresh

As the "Tale of Vistan" (see Chapter One) reveals, the Kaldresh are eternal camp followers; they define themselves as creatures who draw their *vardos* behind armed forces on the march. One can spy a Kaldresh caravan from a distance, since tribes of this *tasque* travel laden with the tools of their trade. Their *vardos* positively clang with iron, and entire herds of animals trample and fuss in their wake. Half-naked, dirty-faced children hoot back and forth while they run alongside the train with long reeds or slender branches, urging stray animals back to the fold. Men on horseback ride from end to end of the caravan, supervising the day's journey, or they scout ahead for a good place to camp. The Kaldresh make no effort to be silent, for they depend on trade with those who hear them coming, and they have no fear of creatures that stalk the night. Tribes of the Kaldresh *tasque* tend to be larger than others—as many as forty or fifty members may live in a single caravan, but the volume of business they conduct offsets the strain of so many mouths to feed.

Kaldresh men are muscular and bucolic creatures who tend to dress in somber colors. Their clothing is designed for durability and comfort—to protect them from forge sparks and to cushion them against long days in the saddle. They often wear cloth hats with turned-down brims, which shield them from the sun and absorb sweat. Their knee-high boots are well made from leather of the highest quality, and it is said that a man who wears Vistani boots never blisters or even grows footsore.

Only elderly Kaldresh males wear a beard, but all men of the *tasque* are dark with chin shadow. They grow their hair long, binding it behind their heads so that it does not hinder their work. Their hands are rough and armored with calluses. They are quiet among *giorgios*, preferring to let the women speak for them, but in the privacy of their encampments, the men are more clearly in charge of daily life.

Kaldresh women dress for a life of hard labor as well. Heavy cotton dresses cover their legs completely, though they are roomy enough to allow free

> While the Vistani are proud of their heritage, they are never eager to share information with any *giorgio*. No one ever says, "Hello! I am a Kaldreshite of the Vatraska tribe." More likely, Vistani identify themselves by family name, rather than by tribal or *tasque* affiliation. They prefer the term Vistani because it identifies them without saying too much. Despite Van Richten's confident assertion that members of each *tasque* may be identified at a glance, such is not the case. Nomadic people do not have the luxury of choosing either their "look" or their standard equipment. While the information that follows can certainly influence the appearance of a given tribe, there are few absolutes, and the Dungeon Master is encouraged to defy all attempts to pigeonhole a Vistani tribe by their fashions alone.

movement. Plain-colored shirts are buttoned all the way up to their necks. Many women, especially among the Equaar, wear pants. Elderly women wear scarves over their hair, while the younger ladies usually allow their locks to flow freely. Some women prefer boots like those the men wear, but many wear sandals which conform to the feet and have the same reputation for comfort as do Kaldresh boots. Other Kaldresh women avoid footwear altogether, having feet as tough as leather.

Kaldresh children wear hand-me-downs or nothing at all (if weather permits), for the Vistani are free of the mores of civilized society and do not teach their children to be ashamed of their bodies. There is no distinction between the sexes of children before the age of ten years in terms of treatment, responsibilities, or games they play, except that boys are more often charged with the care of forge tools. As those instruments are quite heavy, I suspect such chores help strengthen small arms for the day when they will take up smithing.

Despite the clear presence of three and four generations of Kaldresh in a single tribe, aging is apparently unknown to them. They seem to reach a stage of maturity with which they are comfortable, then stop growing older. By their own report they are extremely long-lived, and a child I would have taken to be about ten years of age told me he was actually sixteen "by *giorgio* count." When I asked a Vatraska captain to reckon his "*giorgio* age," he merely shrugged, "Your own birth and death are but a tiny piece of reality," which, I eventually learned, meant that he had been born before me and would be here long after I died.

The Kaldresh adorn themselves with precious little jewelry, although they decorate their *vardos* and their prize stallions with elaborate metalwork. Vanity is unknown to them, and they are quite unconscious of fashion. Ironically, Vistani adornments become very popular in larger cities from time to time. The Kaldresh do not understand why their ornamental wares are ignored in one place, then sell out completely in the next, but they care little what *giorgios* think and take no pains to meet the superficial demands of style.

Attitudes and Behavior

The average Kaldresh Vistana is quiet and withdrawn, given to minding his own business, unlikely to answer the challenge of an aggressive *giorgio* who seeks to harass him. This *tasque* has survived by remaining nonthreatening, not only because its members are consistently mistrusted by outsiders, but because they are used to dealing with soldiers and other aggressive types of people. Historically, if an army they were following was overrun, the routing forces quickly saw that the Vistani had no resistance to offer, which may have many times spared them persecution and bonded servitude.

The Kaldresh are polite to non-Vistani, but never friendly. Their status as camp followers occasionally leads a *giorgio* to mistake their women for prostitutes! To the contrary, they are very protective of their women and careful to guard against contamination by *giorgio* blood.

As a matter of fact, the Kaldresh are rather staunch and reserved. I have not seen any evidence of passion between them, especially in comparison to members of the Boem *tasque*, who positively radiate emotion. Like all Vistani, the Kaldresh are extraordinarily private creatures in general. For example, I recall excusing myself from the circle about the campfire one night, casually mentioning to some of the men that I needed to relieve myself; the shock and repugnance on their faces immediately told me that I had spoken improperly, and alerted me to the discreet Vistani practice of slipping away without a word, deliberately ignored by one's fellows.

The Kaldresh are completely apolitical, and it is impossible to involve them in intrigue of any sort unless you pay them money. Even then, they accept no personal stake in the matter. They will sell a sword to a known and dangerous

fugitive, then sharpen the blades of the mob that is hunting him down without concern for either party's agenda. They will honor a pledge to transport a man using their mystical ways, then abandon him to a pack of wolves at his destination, having discharged their agreement. A dying man who lies bleeding in the road is of no concern to them. They will not act to save him, but neither will they rob him or allow their animals to trample him. They want only to be left to themselves, for which favor they stay briefly in the area, then move on.

Beliefs Concerning Time

The Kaldresh believe that they have been removed from time. They do not measure the hours of a day or the months of a year, for such things have no relevance to them. Every moment is the sum total of existence, which does not pass away when the next one arrives, but becomes a part of an ever growing reality. They do not remember the past, they simply look upon it as part of the whole. A Kaldresh Vistana does not say, "I had forgotten that." He says, "I did not notice that."

No doubt, this disdain for measured time has evolved out of their nomadic lifestyle. When the road traveled stretches to eternity, time loses its meaning. Why consider yesterday or tomorrow when they are largely the same as today? Long-term prisoners report a similar cessation of the experience of passing time, as do elves, who live so very long that human terms such as "old" and "forever" have little meaning. What renders Kaldresh philosophy so distinct is that they do actually seem to exist outside of time.

They "recall" (for lack of a better term) events of the distant past as if they just experienced them, and the future appears to be as easily accessible to their minds as the past, if they can be convinced to look at it. The Kaldresh neither reminisce nor dream, for all of life is found in the here and now.

This sheds a whole new perspective on fortune-telling. Since time does not march inexorably forward for the Kaldresh, the future does not remain ever "ahead." A seer need not look forward to see the future, but rather in a direction of which *giorgios* are not aware. Hence, a Vistana does not look beyond the present to glimpse the future; he discovers it where it lies, near at hand, already there.

Specific Powers

Of all the *tasques*, the Kaldresh appear the least overtly magical in day-to-day life. They do not weave musical magic as do the Boemians, nor relish the arcane as do the Manusa. They make little of abilities which all Vistani possess.

However, they do have one curious faculty which smacks of mysticism: Whether the tribe seer, a spy, or some magical spell informs them, the Kaldresh have an uncanny talent for homing in on conflicts. If war is brewing, or a mob is on the march, or even when a wealthy party of heroes prepares a final assault on a stronghold, the Kaldresh seem to instinctively sniff it out and position themselves to profit by the blood to be spilled.

Furthermore, the tribes of this *tasque* seem to intuitively know what equipment, stock, and rations are most needed by both parties, for those items are ready for sale with a consistency that defies luck. Such supplies are expensive, as they are no doubt dearly needed, but those who deal honestly with the Kaldresh receive good value for their money. I do not

imply that the Vistani unfailingly provide critical magical items (although they are known to deal in these as well), but a combatant looking for, say, a battering ram or a mancatcher is often amazed to discover that very item for sale in the back of a Kaldresh supply wagon that rolled in unexpectedly.

An enterprising Dungeon Master can use the Kaldresh as a fallback source of supplies. If the heroes have neglected to pick up some piece of equipment vital to their mission, a Kaldresh caravan can come rolling along. Of course, items the adventurers need should cost at least 50% more than they would in town, but all wares are of excellent quality, unless the Vistani have cause to cheat the heroes. Unless the Dungeon Master specifically wants to supply the adventurers with a magical item, the Kaldresh only stock items from the tack and harness and weapons lists in the equipment section of the *Player's Handbook*.

The Defining Craft

The Kaldresh pride themselves on their ability to provide the tools, beasts of burden, and services necessary to engage in conquest. Although they are not warriors themselves, they recognize the fact that a traveling army needs more than muscle and blood to fuel its progress. Every few years, when Lord Drakov of Falkovnia mobilizes his forces and marches against Darkon, it is said that the Kaldresh gather and take their places in the rear lines, prepared to support and profit from the effort. By my observation, the tribes merely wander where the winds blow them, offering their wares in towns and occasionally accepting special orders for custom work.

The price one pays for the services of the Kaldresh can be wildly negotiable, for they do not expect to grow rich by their trades, but they do expect value in return for their work. Each tribe within this *tasque* carries instruments of blacksmithing. All can produce metal goods of a quality equal to those produced at a permanent forge. Weapons, pikes, horseshoes, nails, and even ornamental ironwork of Vistani make are highly prized among the Falkovnians, who appreciate such things. It is said a Vistani-forged sword never loses its edge, a Vistani hammered breastplate cannot be pierced by nonmagical weapons, and a Vistani-made horseshoe is never thrown.

Those of Kaldresh blood are expert breeders of large animals such as horses, cattle, sheep, and oxen. The bloodlines of Nova Vaasan horses were refined to their present excellence by the Vistani. Many a breeder in Kantora, Egertus, and Arbora would pay a Kaldresh Vistana handsomely to become chief handler on his ranch. One telltale sign that the Vistani on the outskirts of town are Kaldresh is the presence of herd animals. Such stock is well tended, yielding sweet, tender meat

Gold is usually part of the equation when conducting business with Vistani. When setting up shop on the edge of a city or village, they sell commonly available items (those wares listed on the standard weapon and equipment charts—Dungeon Master's discretion) at or slightly below market value. During market days, they are always quick to entice *giorgios* with items not openly for sale: fortune-telling, *evil eye* amulets, cursed items. Those items are offered privately, usually for a substantial markup.

The Vistani are also willing to negotiate for favors and pacts almost as often as they are for gold. Usually they bargain from strength, when buyers need their services more than they need whatever a *giorgio* offers. Vistani never require evil acts of a *giorgio*, but their tasks might entail great danger. Those who try to renege on an agreement struck with a Vistana are subject to a "frustrating" or worse curse, depending on the degree to which the Vistana has been cheated. Unfortunately for them, heroes who are cheated must find their own recourse.

and thick, soft wool. Beasts of burden display almost human intelligence in their ability to learn and understand commands.

Tribes of the Kaldresh *tasque* are especially knowledgeable in the arts of healing. Though all Vistani have a working knowledge of natural medicines and curative elixirs, members of this *tasque* produce healing agents more quickly, with less raw materials, and with greater effects than even some clerics I have known. Only the Kaldresh know how to make *porda*, an extract of nightshade which can actually heal wounds.

> Adventurers can purchase 2d4 doses of *porda* from any Kaldresh tribe for 100 gp per dose (no experience-point value granted). Upon drinking the brew, the imbiber immediately makes a saving throw vs. poison. If the save is successful, the elixir acts as a *potion of healing;* if it fails, the imbiber is not healed and suffers a –1 penalty to attack and damage rolls for 1d6 hours, due to nausea.

The Kamii

I chuckle to recall that my old friend, the late Geddar Ironheart (a dwarf of gruff manners), never had much to say about humans which could be construed as positive. In his sardonic eyes, we humans are too quick to react, too soon to give up, too careless, too forgiving, too sweet-natured, and so on. In particular, nothing drew more scorn from him than the work of human blacksmiths. He claimed he could tell a human-made sword just by the "pitiful cling" it made when struck against other objects. "Good thing it's magical," he once sneered at a potent holy sword. "All this frilly metalwork would fall apart with one good hit."

Imagine his surprise when he praised a newly discovered warhammer for its obviously dwarven construction, only to learn that the weapon had been forged by a Vistana. Even after the truth had been revealed to him by my wizard friend Shauten, he could not help but admire the hammer's balance, its resistance to denting and chipping, the ingenuity of the fluted grip, the economy of materials, the sublime configuration of the head, and more. When Shauten identified the make of the weapon to me, I could only shrink from it and call it cursed, for I was blind to the talents of the Vistani, and I had no idea what the Kaldresh were.

Geddar's surprising warhammer was, in fact, created by the Kamii. This particular Kaldresh tribe excels in the skills of the forge, working in tin, steel, silver, gold, and many other metals with equal ease and expertise. They create not only weapons, but armor, shields, nails, horseshoes, bridles, wheels, axles, locking mechanisms, jewelry, and remarkable puzzles to be taken apart and put back together again (with a great deal of perplexity and frustration on my part). These wares are not magical, but they often behave as if they were, so cunning is their make.

The speed at which the Kamii work is a marvel as well. Their forge hammers rise and fall in blinding rhythm, filling the air with frenetic sparks that appear to swirl around the smith in a magical pattern. Two and three smiths may pound a single metal strip at the same time, yet they never interfere with one another's strokes, and they never seem to confer on the intended shape of the object they mold. It is said that when they plunge a red-hot weapon into a cold bath to temper it, the rising steam takes the semblance of the man who will wield it.

Objects for Enchantment

While the Vistani are not commonly makers of magical items, Kamii smiths

> Weapons produced by the Kamii are not magical in themselves, but they behave as +1 weapons for the purposes of the creatures they can strike. Weapon speed is reduced by 1 as well, because of the superior balance of Kamii craftsmanship. Cursed weapons will function differently, of course.

are sometimes called upon to produce objects that are subsequently enchanted by wizards. It is no secret that magical weapons, armor, and jewelry must be constructed with materials and craftsmanship of the highest quality before they are imbued with power, and there are very few *giorgio* blacksmiths with the talent to achieve work of such quality. However, virtually any smith of the Kamii tribe can accomplish such tasks. In fact, I learned while I was among them that they had even fashioned a number of amulets which would eventually become lich phylacteries. While such intelligence did not endear the Kamii to me, it did impress me, for there are few constructions as exacting as a phylactery, and for an aspiring lich to trust such important work to another is astounding!

Cursed items: While the enchantment of magical items is largely outside the sphere of Kamii workmanship, I fear that cursed items are not. The Vistani are well known for their power to curse, and this ability extends into the Kamii smithy as well. Of course, they can make weapons which seem to strike wide of the mark every time. There are more subtle and insidious contraptions, befitting the Vistani reputation. The Kamii create for those who seek fiery recompense or cold revenge. Kamii have shown me rings that induce nightmares, neck chains that weigh mere ounces but weary the wearer as if they weighed a ton, buckles that lock shut and cannot be opened, pocket knives that cannot slice warm butter yet become razor blades when touched to one's own hand, and other objects which are mere nuisances at best and lethal traps at worst. A man who purchases one of these items risks his own safety, for evil sent abroad seldom fails to find its way home.

The Kamii can produce weapons that are subtly inferior, inflicting a –1 penalty on all attack and damage rolls. They sell these "cursed" weapons to *giorgios* who display a lack of respect at any time during their visit with the tribe. Dungeon Masters should allow a player to think her character has a superior weapon (for a time) by quietly assessing the attack and damage penalties when such rolls are made. Note that the "curse" is not magical; it is a manifestation of intentionally defective workmanship.

Other items forged by the Kamii actually are cursed, but only to an "embarrassing" extent at best (see Chapter Twelve of *Domains of Dread*). Such an object should be little more than a nuisance to the character who owns it, and easily discarded once its nature is detected (unless it is an object that sticks to the hero like a piece of unruly tape). Van Richten has already mentioned some possibilities, but the Dungeon Master is encouraged to invent his own insidious devices. Assign subtle powers to the item, which do not immediately implicate it when the hero begins to experience problems.

Anyone who purchases these cursed items with intent to inflict them upon another is subject to a 1% powers check.

The Equaar

Many a battle has been won or lost when the general's horse stumbled, and many an army's sweet victory or bitter defeat depended on the taste of their dinner the night before the final conflict.

Any soldier will tell you how difficult it is to fight a bloody war hundreds of miles from home if one has been forced to carry his weapons and supplies the whole way.

Animals account for the success or failure of campaigns in ways that we do not much think about until their absence forces us to do so. The Vistani are sensitive to this issue, the Equaar especially; they are expert animal handlers. I have met precious few non-Vistani who have displayed the same affinity for all natural creatures, big and small, and I include rangers and druids in my mental survey!

All Vistani seem to speak with animals and be understood, but the Equaar know bestial hearts better than the rest. I chuckled the first time I saw a Vistana speak to a cat as if it were human, telling it to go and have a specific one of the many children milk a goat for her stew. Then I gawked like a Barovian woodcutter at a fireworks display when that very boy appeared a half hour later with a sloshing bucket in his hand. Was this a Vistani display of power, the prowess of a not-so-dumb animal, or an elaborate conditioned response? I cannot say.

There is no such thing as a mad dog, a ferocious wildcat, or a rampaging bull in the presence of a an Equaar Vistana. He speaks a few soothing words or sings a gentle melody, and the snarling lip relaxes, the ripping teeth disappear behind an affectionate tongue, the menacing claws retract, and the charging horns come to an abrupt halt.

My first encounter with the Equaar was on the horse plains of Nova Vaasa. Arturi rightly guessed we would find them there, and our timing was excellent, for we chanced to see them at work before they were conscious of our presence. We were rewarded with a rare sight: the "capture" of a wild stallion.

We had climbed a bluff just south of Briarweed Forest to gain a more commanding view of the grassy, yellow tableland. I was searching the northeastern horizon with a special invention given me by my old comrade Alanik Ray, an adjustable spyglass with two lenses, when Arturi tugged at my sleeve and directed my attention eastward. Through the knee-high straw thundered a score of fine horses, their muscles rippling in the hot sun. I raised the tubular spyglass to my eye and admired their graceful forms racing the wind across the prairie. As my optical enhancer drifted over the herd from the lead stallion to the sturdy mares half obscured in a billowing cloud of dust, my sight came to rest on another pair of horses close behind the herd, ridden bareback by swarthy women with streaming black hair. I gasped, marveling at their riding skills, for they grasped their mounts by the mane and directed their steps without the use of a bridle!

"Equaar," pronounced my guide with a hint of admiration in his voice.

The Vistani somehow urged their horses to all speed, with neither crop nor spur to drive them on, and the graceful beasts accelerated until they galloped amidst the herd. I thought that I would never see a more masterful display of horsemanship, when suddenly they hiked themselves up and stood upon the shoulders of their animals! Quite leisurely, they took stock of the creatures all around them, maintaining their breakneck speed the whole time! In a blur of hair and motion, one woman leaped through the air and landed on the back of one of the wild stallions. The other Vistana quickly followed suit. The two gripped the manes of their new mounts, who broke from the herd and began to buck wildly. No knight could have stayed atop a spike-goaded horse with the ease these women showed. In what seemed mere moments, the untamed beasts grew calm and responsive to their rider's ministrations. Meanwhile, the mounts they had ridden in pursuit followed dutifully behind, conspirators in the capture of their fellows.

I was amazed, speechless, humbled, and altogether taken with the beauty and grace of those Vistani, though I had not come any closer to them than my spyglass brought me.

My respect for the Equaar's animal husbandry only grew when I met them in person. The Equaar do not fit the common perception of a Vistani tribe. One expects to see a caravan of *vardos* and women with bells on their toes and *crystal balls* in their hands. Instead, the Equaar are wranglers and shepherds who carry all their possessions on the backs of their animals. They sleep in tents or under the stars. Their women rarely wear dresses, for such clothing is not amenable to the saddle. One might easily mistake them for ranch hands on a cattle drive or common shepherds taking a herd to market.

Animals for Sale

Those who seek a riding or pack horse to ease the long road of a quest would do well to trade with an Equaarian. But do not assume that a few coins will seal the bargain. These people have a more than personal interest in their stock. After negotiating with a Vistana for the opportunity to purchase, the buyer must offer his payment to the animal itself, along with a suitable tidbit of food—an apple for a horse, an ear of corn for a cow. If the animal accepts the offering, the Vistana consents to the deal.

This ritual is not merely showmanship; I have seen a man beg to buy a horse, agree on a price, and tender his gold, only to be rejected by the steed. After a few words with the Equaarian, he apologized to the animal for undervaluing it and doubled his offer! At last he was accepted. Whether the horse responded to what it considered a proper price, to a man who displayed an earnest desire to own it, or even to signals from its trainer is debatable, but the fact remains that the horse itself consented to the transaction. Such an animal is obviously more intelligent than the average jade, and therefore is worth its higher cost.

Stock animals are not the only creatures that Equaarian husbandry renders unequivocally superior. These Vistani raise dogs that always respond to a master's command the first time, and that readily obey rather complex hand signals as well. Whatever the specific breed and skill of the dog, it performs its duties without supervision all day long and displays loyalty worthy of a tale. Hawks and falcons instantly imprint upon whomever owns their jesses, and they can slip and pursue an

Equaar tribesmen are adept with both wild and domestic animals to the same degree as a ranger, and they also can employ the spell-like power *animal friendship*, three times per day. They can use this ability either to capture wild animals, or to send them away. With wild horses, they can use the ability automatically (no saving throw) and as often as they like, not counting it against their daily allotment. Furthermore, all Equaar automatically possess the Animal Handling, Animal Lore, and Animal Training (Horse) nonweapon proficiencies.

Equaar-trained riding horses cost no less than twice the market price. (The *Player's Handbook* suggests 75 gp, but Dungeon Masters must set their own economic index for their individual campaigns.) The Vistana may actually agree to a lower price, but the buyer must then offer his money to the horse itself. The base chance of acceptance is 75%, minus 1% for every gp below the Vistana's asking price. An Equaar-trained horse accepts no rider but its owner, has an effective Intelligence of 2, and obeys as if its owner had the Animal Training proficiency.

A prospective buyer of other Vistani stock must offer payment to the animal as well, for the Equaar consider all natural creatures "free" to choose. Animals other than horses indicate their acceptance by little or no reaction; the animal's most typical negative behavior (a dog snarls, a sheep flees, a hawk ruffles its feathers, etc.) shows rejection of the offer.

In general, such an animal does not display any remarkable skills, but it can be considered the best specimen of its breed found anywhere: Stock animals yield the best meat, work animals perform consistently well, and so forth.

individual quarry in a flock if the falconer can clearly identify it.

Tracking

The Equaar are expert trackers as well, and though they think of themselves primarily as camp followers, I doubt not that they are occasionally recruited as spies by the armies they follow. They might employ dogs for the purpose or they might follow a trail as rangers do, but in any event they reported to me that they could pursue a man whose path had been lost to others several months in the past. I suspect that they combine their innate prescient abilities with more mundane tricks learned from centuries of life on the open road to achieve the success of which they boast. However, their methods are ever secretive, as are most Vistani proficiencies, and even the wisest sages can only speculate.

Equaar enjoy the tracking proficiency with a bonus of +4 to the roll. Furthermore, they can employ a limited form of *object reading* (see *The Complete Psionics Handbook*, page 31) to determine which way their quarry went. To use this ability, a Vistana must place his hand on an object the quarry has touched in the last seven days, and he must make a Wisdom check with a +5 penalty. If the check is successful, the Vistana turns toward the quarry's present location and gets an impression of how far away (in miles) it lies.

Personally Chosen Familiars

Wizards who know the Equaar sometimes pay them handsomely to raise and train an animal that will become a familiar. Such creatures are captured young and fed a diet of their favorite sustenance spiced with special herbs and a modicum of the mage's blood. When the animal reaches adulthood, it is introduced to the wizard in a formal ritual, supervised by the Vistana who raised it, during which time the bond is transposed to the wizard as he casts his *find familiar* spell. According to my sources, such familiars are no different from those summoned in the traditional manner; the main advantage is that a mage can choose his particular lifetime companion. However, the creature in question must be a natural animal.

A wizard who buys a hand-selected Equaar familiar first pays 1,000 gp per experience level. If the Vistani do not have the desired animal in their caravan, a period of 1d4 months is required to trap and train the creature, at the end of which time the Vistana trainer contacts the buyer. (Needless to say, trust is involved here, and an Equaar does not hesitate to cheat a *giorgio* who offends him in any way.) Once the animal is selected, the wizard must give one pint of his own blood, losing one-fourth of his hit point total in the process, to be mixed with the prospective familiar's food over a period of one month, from new moon to new moon. The Vistani do not allow the wizard to live with them while the animal is prepared.

When a month has passed, the buyer is contacted again, at which time he casts *find familiar* in the animal's direct presence. The creature makes a saving throw vs. spell. If it fails, it becomes the wizard's familiar, conforming to the details of the *find familiar* spell. (The familiar will not be a pseudofamiliar, as per the *RAVENLOFT MONSTROUS COMPENDIUM Appendix III.*) If the saving throw succeeds, or if the wizard is unavailable within 24 hours of the new moon (when the spell should be cast), the process breaks down and must be started anew. No refunds are given for failed attempts.

Mystical Figurines

Perhaps the strangest and most magical products of the Equaar are the tiny figurines of animals that they carve. During the three days of the full moon and the one day of the new moon, these little statuettes come to life. They walk among their natural counterparts as

guardians so that the men and women of the tribe may attend and participate in moon rituals (see Chapter Four) without fear for the safety of their herds. The Equaar create only one or two of each figurine, and they never sell them to other tribes, let alone to *giorgios*.

> The Equaar carve animals of wood that conform to the rules listed for *figurines of wondrous power* in the *Dungeon Master Guide*. However, only *ivory goats, obsidian steeds, onyx dogs,* and *serpentine owls* are found. Also, they can animate only during the periods Van Richten specified earlier. These magical creatures serve strictly to guard Vistani possessions. If they are stolen, they automatically attack the thief after animating.

I must pause to point out that, like most Kaldresh, the Equaar are not overtly magical people. Yet, like all Vistani, they remain magical by nature. Some of the common traits I have ascribed to them above could be accounted arcane, although I am more disposed to think of them as natural byproducts of the tribe's mystical temperament, rather than the conscious construction of components and formulae, combined with a harnessing of sorcerous energies. The distinction is a fine one, yet it is worth noting.

The Vatraska

No monster hunting party, or any group of adventurers for that matter, is complete without a priest. Certainly his holy symbol plays a definitive role in battling creatures of the night, but it is the healing power of a cleric which remains his most invaluable trait.

War is another matter. The average army would require an entire platoon of priests to service its wounded. Perhaps in history legions of warrior-priests have marched off to wage holy war, secure that they could take care of themselves when a day's blood had been shed. But most military forces now are made of soldiers, trained to kill and not to cure. When they need care, they turn to the third tribe of the Kaldresh *tasque*, the Vatraska, whose niche among the camp followers is healing.

The Vatraska remind me of an officious aunt of mine who cared for me when I was a child. I never sensed any love from her—indeed, I thought that she disliked me very much. She tended to my scrapes and bruises with detached efficiency, and she poured foul-tasting concoctions down my gullet without explanation or apology, presuming that my only reasonable reaction was to feel better and be grateful for it.

When I became a physician, old Aunt Shariss took it upon herself full credit for making me what I was. By some stretch of the imagination, I suppose she was right: I knew there had to be a better way to heal the sick, and I was bound and determined to find it.

Like my aunt (and, on reflection, all Vistani), members of the Vatraska tribe remain detached from the personal feelings of those outside their circle. Also like Aunt Shariss, they apply their remedies without any indication of caring if they'll work. Their curatives are herbal and frequently induce stomach cramps when ingested, yet they do seem to be effective.

Unlike my aunt, however, the Vatraska are motivated not by any sense of duty, but rather by profit: They barter in gold and favors like their kin. Their behavior is such as one might expect of a people who are professional healers in the wake of an army of strangers. They are not doctors, which is to say that they do not enter their profession for humanitarian reasons, nor are they patriots seeking to advance the cause of the armed forces they serve.

As members of the Kaldresh *tasque*, the Vatraska are difficult to discern from the Kamii. They are skilled blacksmiths and animal handlers who draw wagons and *vardos* with them as they travel, although careful observation indicates that they pack a great deal more foodstuffs and stores of herbs and spices than other tribes.

There seem to be fewer Vatraska than any other Kaldresh tribe, however. I only had the opportunity to meet with one such tribe, and Arturi explained that he had only met three Vatraska caravans in all his travels over the years. Since the Vistani are not overfond of *giorgios*, and *giorgios* tend to seek out clerics and doctors for their medical needs, it is not surprising that so few of these people are found in our realms.

Restoratives

The Vatraska cast no spells of healing, nor do they brew magical potions, but their ability to cure is perhaps superior to my own as an herbalist physician. I conferred with them regarding the particular herbs and poultices common to their medicinal stores and found that there were few Vistani balms with which I was not already acquainted. The only real surprises to me were the myriad poisons that they somehow used to advantage, breaking fevers and healing various diseases with extracts of belladonna, strychnine, hemlock, and hellebore. As I have already mentioned, all Kaldresh know how to concoct an elixir of nightshade called *porda*, which

has a limited effect on physical wounds. None of these recipes would they share with me, and none would they sell for any amount of money, unless the potion was consumed under their supervision. They insisted that their remedies would not work unless they personally administered them, but I suspect that they were simply protecting their secrets.

Curatives

The restorative value of chicken broth is well known to mothers everywhere, although its alchemical workings are not understood, but the Vatraska seem to comprehend the principles which render soup an effective medicine. A freshly cooked meal served up by these people has the effect of speeding up the natural healing process and affording a significantly better night's sleep. (Perhaps the two are interdependent.) This applies not only to their chicken stock, but to everything they prepare to eat, including the rations that a soldier might carry in his pack. Once again, I am at a loss to explain the reason for this benefit. I observed no special methods of preparation of these culinary cures, and an alchemist friend of mine in Mordentshire analyzed a bit of jerked beef prepared by the Vatraska, only to conclude that it was "food, a bit spicy, nothing more." His proposal that the edibles healed through the power of suggestion intrigued me, but I learned

Vatraska restoratives are effective against all nonmagical diseases and mummy rot as well, but they cannot halt the progress of magical diseases or lycanthropy. The price for such aid should be dear, usually sucking up most of the party's ready cash and even a magical item or two, and the results are not guaranteed. Furthermore, 3d20 hours are required to gather the proper ingredients for the particular disease to be treated.

A character who drinks the herbal extract is thoroughly nauseated and incapacitated for 1d20+4 hours while the serum works its way through the body. At the end of that time, the character makes a saving throw vs. poison with a +4 bonus. Success indicates the treatment was effective, while failure means that the disease is still there, but it has not spread further since the serum was ingested.

that they were effective even on people who did not realize what they were ingesting.

Any type of food or drink prepared by the Vatraska has the effect of naturally healing hit point damage at double the normal rate for 24 hours, and allowing spellcasters to regain spells in half the normal time, provided it is eaten or drunk directly before a resting period. There is nothing magical about the process; the effect is more like that of having eaten a "good, old-fashioned, home-cooked dinner."

If a *giorgio* spends the evening in the company of a Vatraska tribe, he is treated to such culinary delights as a guest. However, trail preparations cost 20 gp for one day's rations.

Poisons

With all their traffic in toxins, it cannot come as a surprise that the Vatraska are also vendors of poison. Such elixirs are quite cunning in their effects, for few of them are so mundane as to simply kill their victims. Some of them weaken a man, either temporarily or permanently. Others steal away sight or one of the other senses, or induce madness, or even turn the skin an unnatural color so as to make the imbiber appear undead. Vatraska venoms can induce intermittent sneezing attacks, persistent itching, chronic disorientation, or intolerable body odor.

There are more insidious antigens, too. For example, they brew a potent drink called *braxat*, which is indistinguishable from certain wines. A man who imbibes a glass of it feels a warm, pleasant glow that lasts throughout the evening and sends him to bed in a very mellow mood. Sometime during the night, however, he awakens sweating and finds that he cannot easily relieve the fever coursing through his body. Cool baths may alleviate the symptoms, but they cannot eliminate the problem. Over the next few days, his temperature continues to rise, affecting his judgment, temper, and effectiveness in day-to-day life. Eventually, he begins to go mad with fever and lash out at those around him. Finally, if an antidote is not administered in a timely manner, the poor wretch literally explodes from an extreme surfeit of internal heat!

Another maddening tincture of Vatraska making is *etherol*. This colorless, odorless liquid may be taken for a rather flat-tasting water, far from refreshing. One to four days after it has been ingested, its victim begins to lose his appetite; food no longer tastes palatable, and it rests heavily in his stomach. Soon after, he begins to lose his sense of touch, which inhibits his motor functions and capacity to recognize pain. Eventually, someone points out that he seems to be translucent, that he almost glows if a bright light shines behind him. At that point, the poison's effects accelerate considerably, and the victim begins to literally fade away. Over a few short days he becomes increasingly transparent, and ultimately he fades completely.

As many players are likely to read notes meant for the Dungeon Master, precise game mechanics are not included for the poisons described above. However, Van Richten's description should be sufficient to generate them. The Dungeon Master is encouraged to invent a few toxins of his own imagining, using the following guidelines.

The poison should never be instantly fatal, but should have progressively debilitative effects leading inexorably toward doom.

The final effect of the poison should be something worth talking about for years to come, especially if the character does not survive it.

Roleplaying incentives such as madness (see Chapter Six of *Domains of Dread*), surprising new powers related to the nature of the poison, or odd side effects are always a plus.

Finding the Vistani who created the poison and who therefore have the antidote can be the subject of a rapid side trip or an extended adventure, but it should not be a simple task.

helpless as a geist. Worst of all, once he has passed a certain point, nothing can save him, for he is no longer substantial enough to take an antidote or receive any form of magical absolution. Madness is not inevitable, but it is certainly likely, for the victim's fate becomes plain to him well before it claims him.

Of course, the Vatraska produce an antidote for every poison—but knowing one exists is one thing, and procuring it is another.

The Boemians

Quite unlike the Kaldresh, the Boemians seem to appear out of nowhere. Indeed, this *tasque*'s flair for the dramatic may well demand an entrance. Once it is noticed, a Boem caravan bursts to life like a *fireball* in the night. The people sing as they go about their daily business, and their laughter is thoroughly musical. Townsfolk may grimace and shake their heads at the approach of a Boem *tasque*'s caravan, yet they cannot help but peek through their shutters at the approaching spectacle.

Handsome young men balance atop the *vardos* and wagons as they roll up to a town, sawing merrily at violins and strumming guitars without missing a beat. Raven-haired beauties, wearing bright floral dresses and bejeweled with sparkling crystals, lean out the doors and windows of their moving domiciles, promising revelations of the past and future with their dark and shining eyes. The *vardos* themselves are painted brilliant colors. Every trimming is gilded, then hung with swinging oil lanterns sheathed in colored glass. The horse teams are matched so perfectly as to be identical, with coats of unusual colors and a myriad reflective spangles swiveling from their tack. Dogs, nimble and bright-eyed, bound over rocks and tree limbs alongside the caravan. Muzzled bears, fuzzy and playful, caper about on their hind legs as if there were no possible alternative way for them to walk. Song birds in brilliant, impossible shades of red and yellow and blue twitter about in the trees overhead, chirping in a delightful cacophony that underscores the musicians.

There are rarely more than two dozen members of any Boem tribe in a single caravan, yet the display they present makes them appear to number many more. My good friend Sage Ralphusus Wilyams tells me the Boemians are nothing more than a "traveling circus." I had never heard the term before he coined it, but it certainly does describe the Boemians: Wherever they stop, a great circle of *giorgios* is sure to gather round!

A male Boemian is dapper first and handsome second, dressing in silky shirts that afford plenty of room to dance, play music, and gesture melodramatically at every passing moment. His trousers, on the other hand, are invariably dark and form-fitting, perhaps flaring outward at the boot. His jet-black hair twists into chaotic ringlets unless it is slicked back along the sides of his head. He often sports a goatee and a waxed moustache which points straight to the sides or curls back toward his full lips. A Boem male's ears are quite commonly pierced, and his nose as well. Silver, gold, and gems sparkle on him like magic on a faerie. His face—indeed, his whole body—is exceedingly expressive; the Boem man weeps unashamedly and often.

The typical female of the Boem *tasque* is mysterious and sultry. She dresses in clothing that accentuates her mystique—typically in bright-patterned dresses that swirl as she walks, and sheer blouses that distract the *giorgio* eye. Like the men, she pierces her body to decorate it with jewelry. Quite often she goes shoeless throughout the day, although she might adopt tall-heeled, leather boots that lace up the calf. Her lustrous black hair glints blue here and red there in direct sunshine, and it tumbles in thick, abandoned tresses over her shoulders. Her eyes are usually dark, yet occasionally a female Boemian's eyes are crystal-clear blue. Even elderly women of the *tasque*

remain dark and beautiful, altogether free of the ravages of time.

Boem children are rare in the extreme. In my travels with Arturi Radanavich, I spent time with three Boem tribes, and I saw just two children, both male. Whether this is intentional I cannot say, for, as with all Vistani, one simply does not discuss subjects of a personal nature. In any event, both young men were dressed very much as their elders, although I saw no signs of body piercing upon them.

Attitudes and Behaviors

The Boemians are a passionate and lively people in public. Well aware of *giorgio* attitudes toward them, they are deliberately charming, always on stage. The men speak in poetic flourishes, and the women radiate mystery. As a group, they exude an idyllic contentment to let the world pass them by while they make merry. Such a festive nature is contagious, and soon even the most cynical townsfolk warm to the Boem folk. Theirs is the romantic image of life on the open road. They fire the imaginations of *giorgios* who yearn for excitement and escape.

Only in the woodsy privacy of their encampments, away from village and city folk, do the Boemians reveal another side—equally passionate, but dark and brooding. A great anger churns within them, never finding its way into words, perhaps because complaining is fruitless, and perhaps because they cannot focus on any one thing that troubles them. I think they envy the *giorgios*' stable life, even as they vehemently insist they want no part of it.

During their *doroq*, the Boemians rail against their lack of a place to call home, yet any suggestion that they should settle down repulses them. They often bemoan the scanty respect accorded them, but they have no compunctions about engaging in rather questionable activities, and I seriously doubt they have the least respect for themselves.

In the privacy of the forest, the Boem folk speak little to one another, but go about their daily tasks, maintaining the caravan. At night, they gather around the campfire as all Vistani do, yet they often simply stare glumly into the flames. They do not sing, although the women do dance with slow, plaintive gestures or feverishly, limbs akimbo, while the men play tempestuous strains on their instruments, sometimes weeping silently as they ply the strings. The stories Boemians tell are tragic, often gruesome, obliterating all hope and happiness. The Forlorn Wanderer (see Chapter One) is typical.

It was a tribe of the Boem *tasque* that stole my son Erasmus and sold him to the vampire Metus three and a half decades ago, so I was never in the least comfortable with these people (nor were they pleased by my presence, I might add). Hence, one might well think that my time spent among them was thoroughly depressing, yet such was not the case.

After I had adjusted to the palpable tension between them and myself, and after I began to comprehend the relationship between their public and private personae, I began to discern a tragic beauty about them. Like a mother who lovingly swaddles her dead infant, or a man who buries the remains of a vampire that was once his true love, the Boemians live in a state of anguish. They are tragedy in motion, a living reflection of this land: vibrant and attractive by day, bitter and lost by night.

Toward *giorgios*, the Boemians feel a little bitterness and a great deal of condescension. Outsiders are, in their eyes, like troublesome young children who cannot be blamed for being what they are—they must be tolerated and cajoled although they are rude and selfish. The Boemians harbor no direct malice toward *giorgios*, no true evil inflames their hearts when they commit criminal acts. They are amoral, not immoral, so neither the joy nor misery of non Vistani are of concern to them, even when they are the cause of either.

The world owes nothing to the Boemians, so far as they are concerned, and they owe nothing in return. There is nothing self-righteous

about their attitude, nor anything defensive. Destiny rules their world; they can neither take control of nor accept responsibility for their existence. That which they do is neither good nor evil, only "necessary."

Beliefs Concerning Time

The Boem conception of time is probably closest to our own, for they postulate that time is a single line spanning the breadth of reality. There is no way to deviate onto other paths, regardless of relative power; even the gods have no influence over time's passage or direction, for all existence, including their own, lies inside the solitary line. And time is the universe—discussions of what lies on the "other side" are pointless, since no one and nothing will ever go there.

A Boem seer has a rather straightforward approach to both past and future. A mystical navigator, she need only trace a well-defined trail into the past, or map its course into the future. When she casts the *tarokka*, looks into a *crystal ball*, examines tea leaves, and so forth, her mind's eye looks back and forth on the road of time, witnessing what cannot be changed, and what must certainly be.

However, the line of time is not perfectly straight. Like the Old Svalich Road through Barovia, there are twists and turns and hills and vales, all of which obscure parts of the road in both directions. Even with a superior vantage point, there always remain lengths of the time line which cannot be seen from the present. Therefore, a seer may know with certainty that particular events occurred in the past, and other events are unavoidable in the future, yet she cannot always know exactly how the past led to the present, nor how the present leads to the future. She must sometimes guess at what lies beyond the slope of a hill or what lurks around a nearby corner, even if she has a clear picture of actions that have taken place, or of milestones inevitably lying in the future. The very best of seers does not look away from the present with any more clarity than the worst—she merely makes better guesses as to what remains unseen.

Specific Powers

Although they are not nearly as magical as the Manusa, members of the Boem *tasque* are quite clearly enchanted, or rather, enchanting. Certainly they are skilled manipulators of words, expert salesmen, and silky-tongued charmers. Yet their calming influence on others is too consistent, too all-encompassing, to be dismissed as merely the result of fast talking and personal charisma.

I have seen the Boemians enter a village amidst cries of "thief" and "monster," sell their wares, perform for the masses, enthrall the young men and ladies, and leave that same municipality to farewells of "friend" and "ever welcome." Only after they have moved on are they remembered as squatters and

As Van Richten suggests, the Boemians do exude an aura that has the effect of a *charm person* spell. To retain negative feelings, a hero must make a successful saving throw vs. spell during each round of contact. However, the effect automatically wears off 24 hours after Vistana and *giorgio* part company.

Anyone who has a specific reason to dislike the Vistani (any *tasque*, not just Boemians) need only make one saving throw at first meeting, with a +4 bonus to the roll. If the save succeeds, the character's dislike and his apparent desire to harbor it ward off the Boem influence. The Vistani realize this, though they do not necessarily take any action based on that information.

The Boemians do not consciously cast this spell-like power. More accurately, they tend to dispel negative impressions by their presence. If a Boemian deliberately attempts to cheat or misuse a character influenced by his Charisma and the character realizes this, the victim is entitled to another saving throw, with a +4 bonus, to break free of the effect.

larcenists, as if the prevailing attitudes had never altered in the slightest.

Such is the simultaneous power and weakness of the Boemians, that they make and lose friends quickly. *Giorgios* who pass among them become captivated, regardless of previous skepticism. The Boem folk are largely unwelcome wherever they come, yet they are allowed to stay with little or no resistance, only to be spat about after they leave.

The Boemians have no explanation to offer for this pattern of behavior, other than to accuse *giorgios* of hypocrisy and pointless fear. However, I suspect that they have a magical aura about them. This acts upon the mind as a *charm person* spell, but only as long as one remains in their presence. The effect cannot be overpowering, for I myself have never felt inclined to like them. (Of course, my history with this *tasque* would render anyone immune to their charms.) Perhaps they merely have the capacity to unveil feelings that already exist, but which people deny. Even those who hate the Vistani may still enjoy, secretly or otherwise, the entertainment they offer. Perhaps a man's opinion about the Vistani is one thing, and his feelings about the diversions they offer is another. In any event, the atmosphere between Boemians and *giorgios* is distinctly more positive when they gather together than when they are apart.

The Defining Craft

The Boemians do not market a craft as do the Kaldresh, but they do provide services. To be sure, they have any number of trinkets and elixirs to sell, but their showmanship really makes them what they are. They are entertainers all, as well as horoscope readers, cartographers, music teachers, and seers. Often they bring news of events abroad. They answer almost any question for a few coins, though they do not promise the truth.

There are a few other "services" which the Boemians are all too willing to perform as well. These are the acts for

The Boemians readily deal in gold, but they are apt to require other commodities of those who seek the services only they can offer. Such payments may include temporary servitude, a short and perilous mission, achieving the release of one of their number who has been arrested, or even providing services for another tribe with whom the Boem trade.

The Boemians are especially likely to require special payment for their "select" services even though they do not feel they are lawbreakers; they still definitely know when they are breaking the law. Such aid has a value that cannot be measured in gold pieces, and they are well aware of that as well.

Note that "breaking the law" does not necessarily refer to injuring the innocent or otherwise committing an act of evil. In a RAVENLOFT campaign, committing a crime may occasionally be an act of good by most standards: Examples of a "good crime" include defying any directive of a domain lord, retrieving a stolen artifact though generations have passed since it was taken, setting up a corrupt politician to receive his just desserts, taking hostage the chief minion of a diabolical monster to discover his plans, and so forth. Sometimes adventurers find themselves adopting a Boem morality to achieve their objectives, at which time the questionable attitudes of the Vistani might seem a bit more palatable than they rightly should.

Nevertheless, the Dungeon Master must be wary of such philosophy and adjudicate accordingly. The Boemians do not court the heroes by tempting them to abandon their morals in favor of expediency, yet they respond in character if they are approached and propositioned. Remember that the means cannot justify the end, and a powers check might be in order, even if the day is saved, when questionable actions are undertaken by heroes.

which all Vistani reputations suffer: smuggling, assassination, and kidnapping. Since Boem fate dictates that whatever happens is preordained, they do not hesitate to commit such deeds, for by their reasoning such things were meant to happen. They argue that if they do not take advantage of the opportunity, someone else will. According to their twisted logic, their acts are not cruel, for they are performed without malice or prejudice. Therefore, the victim is not injured by them, but by inescapable destiny itself. For such injustices they cannot be held responsible, in their opinion, and they do not allow guilt to trouble them in the least.

As a researcher, I must force myself to view the facts from their perspective, and in that spirit I must conclude that they are not wanton criminals. They do not actively seek to engage in reproachable enterprises for their own profit, but merely accept when they are offered a job by folk who do deliberately break the laws of government and humanity. As a wronged father, however, I cannot help but despise them for their heartlessness!

The Naiat

At first glance, it is possible to mistake this tribe for the Equaar, as the Naiat share that tribe's affinity for animals. However, brightly painted *vardos* and slightly more exotic creatures quickly separate the Naiat from the quiet Kaldresh tribe. As often, the Naiat are taken for a traveling carnival or troupe of actors. They are uninhibited, spirited, and quite diverting as they roll into town—not at all the dark and mysterious wayfarers that one most often imagines the Vistani to be (until one observes them in the privacy of their camp, of course).

Carnival Fun

The activities offered by a caravan of Naiat are quite entertaining, although some are not without their perils. Those *giorgios* who enjoy physical contests of strength can pay a gold piece or two to wrestle a muzzled bear while the crowd enthusiastically cheers. Others might have a taste for battling exotic monsters, and the Naiat have created a strange contraption called the House of Mists, which operates on principles of illusory magic: A person steps into a rather small booth, only to discover that inside it is gigantic and occupied by strange and ferocious creatures!

Events at a Naiat Carnival

Bear wrestling: For a gold piece (or a price suitable to the individual campaign), any character can wrestle a Naiat-trained bear, as Van Richten reports. To establish an Armor Class and THAC0, the Dungeon Master should choose a bear with Hit Dice about the same as those of the heroic challenger (see the *Monstrous Manual*™ tome for possibilities). The animal is muzzled and its claws are sheathed, so the hero must shed all armor and weapons before entering the ring.

Both contestants start with 20 "wrestling points." The opponents deplete their points, round by round, by executing various wrestling moves. The victor reduces the adversary to zero points, or executes a successful pin.

Each round, both contestants declare their attack forms simultaneously, then roll 1d20 and add Strength bonuses, if any. If both attack rolls fail, a standoff occurs. If one roll succeeds and the other fails, the successful roller automatically executes the declared maneuver. If both rolls succeed, consult the chart below to see whether the character (C) or the bear (B) is successful, or if a stand-off (S) occurs. A bear hug or limb lock (arm or leg) may be automatically sustained from round to round, requiring a successful attack roll on the part of the victim to break free.

To pin his adversary, the contestant must declare "pin," make a successful attack, then roll once more and achieve a result equal to or higher than the adversary's current wrestling-point total.

Bear Wrestling Table

CHARACTER	BEAR				
	Hug	Throw	Punch	Lock	Pin
Hug	S	C	C	B	B
Throw	B	S	B	C	C
Punch	B	C	S	C	B
Lock	C	B	B	S	C
Pin	C	B	C	B	S

Bear hug: –2 to attack roll; depletes 2 wrestling points per round sustained.

Throw: –4 to attack roll; depletes 4 wrestling points per successful maneuver.

Punch: depletes 2 wrestling points per hit.

Limb lock: depletes 1 wrestling point per round sustained.

A hero who successfully pins a bear receives the animal's full XP value.

For a little extra excitement, the Dungeon Master can roll percentile dice each round; there is a 5% (noncumulative) chance that the bear's muzzle or one claw sheath falls off (roll randomly to determine which). If this occurs, the bear adds the appropriate attack (bite or claw) to its normal wrestling maneuvers—inflicting real damage. Neither the Vistani nor the townsfolk intervene when this happens, and the adventurer is entitled to double experience points if he successfully pins the bear anyway. If other heroes step in and slay the bear, the Vistani expect compensation for the loss of their animal. Note that it is possible for a bear to eventually shed all of its restraining devices.

The House of Mists: The Naiat have a somewhat sinister "virtual reality" booth. A character pays a nominal fee appropriate to the campaign, then steps inside a black box about the size of a telephone booth. Inside, he discovers an infinite space in which to maneuver, all of it shrouded in thick mist; the Dungeon Master can place rocks and other natural terrain within the area as well. Then, from somewhere in the mist, a creature stalks the characters and attacks. The monster can be literally anything the character requests (he's the paying customer), including a creature he would normally not be able to beat. If the character wishes to be surprised, the Dungeon Master can choose any creature from the *MONSTROUS MANUAL* tome or any *RAVENLOFT MONSTROUS COMPENDIUM Appendix*. Be devious with the choice of simulated monster, and ruthless with its tactics, for the character can always play again.

For the purposes of the carnival game, the creature has the same AC and THAC0 as the player. Furthermore, successful attacks do not score damage, but only "hits." However, every monster retains its normal attack forms—a red dragon can breathe fire, a vampire can *charm*, etc. A successful saving throw against any attack indicates no hit. Monsters who deliver multiple attacks do the same in the simulation.

Five hits inflicted on either adversary ends the simulation; the door to the booth opens, and the adventurer emerges into normal daylight (or night). A hero earns no experience points for his misty battles.

Unfortunately for the simulation player, all mental effects suffered in the House of Mists are lasting, and any defeat by attacks on the hero's mind requires a madness check (*Domains of Dread*, Chapter Six).

Musical Instruments

The Naiat create some very special musical instruments that they play for the amusement of the crowd; these are also for sale. They claim that even a tone-deaf squawker such as myself can master one of their instruments with a minimum of practice. Natives of Kartakass hold Naiat guitars and violins in high esteem.

Adventurers may purchase any stringed musical instrument made by the Vistani for 200–500 gp, depending on the campaign economy and the character's ability to haggle. Such instruments convey the Musical Instrument proficiency without requiring the use of any proficiency slots. Bards who own a Naiat-made instrument can modify by 1 all dice rolls related to playing it (including encounter reactions, morale rolls, and saving throws as per the *Player's Handbook*).

The Corvara

How shall I address the subject of this tribe in any objective way? Regardless of my desire to forgive those who have injured me, in spite of the fact that I have come to consider Arturi Radanavich a personal friend, and even in my fuller understanding of what the Vistani are, I cannot help but think ill of the Corvara.

Though I am an experienced observer of the world who has witnessed terrible cruelty, though I have looked into faces evil beyond the power of words to express, though I surely have become inured to the depths of darkness that pervade this land, still there is one small part of my heart that can never accept the loss of my son. I may forgive, yet I can never forget, and my observations regarding this tribe are best read with that fact in mind.

The Corvara are tinkers, jacks of all trades yet masters of none. They are perhaps the black sheep of this *tasque*. They excel at few things of value to most *giorgios*, so they are least welcomed of all visitors. Sometimes they imitate the Naiat and attempt to generate a carnival atmosphere, but the entertainments they offer are along the lines of gambling, drinking, contests of pugilism, and other unwholesome attractions. Often they engage in scams, or sell elixirs of dubious quality and effect. They excel at twisting *giorgios*' words to their own advantage, staying within the letter of an agreement but brutally perverting its spirit. The Corvara's one true skill is adeptness at opening locks and manufacturing skeleton keys for that purpose.

This tribe frequently finds that it has overstayed its welcome, for it sets up camp where it can best take advantage of local grasslands, fishing holes, and villages where the residents are foolish with their money. The Corvara remain camped until they have taxed the limits of those resources, which angers the populace. All too often the Corvara are escorted from the area by the local militia, or chased away by mobs.

One day, as we searched the domains for a Corvara tribe, Arturi told me of a particular exploit in which one of his tribe was approached by a wealthy merchant of Lekar. The merchant wished to avenge himself on a rival by having him arrested for gambling, an offense punishable by death in Falkovnia. The merchant planned to goad his rival into accepting a challenge at cards, and asked the Corvara to play the part of "scheming, opportunistic rogues" (he foolishly used those words) hosting the game outside of town. Of course, the merchant intended to set up both his rival and the Vistani. He informed Lord Drakov's militia of the impending illegal activity and promised to lead them to the tribe of law-breaking Vistani (and his rival as well).

On the appointed day, he and a force of thirty soldiers marched to the agreed-upon place. But the merchant's plot backfired. They found no one but his puzzled rival at the gambling site. The "scheming, opportunistic" Corvara were instead engaged in clearing his house of its valuables. With the majority of police out of town, they had no trouble looting the premises and escaping.

Arturi could not hide a certain amount of pride as he told that story, and I was reminded that he was one of the people who had stolen my child. For a moment, I wondered if they had known that the death of their tribesman was inevitable, and counted on my fright to betray me! Had they meant to take Erasmus all along, and brought their

dying companion only as a method of initiating contact? I remained in control of myself despite that thought. Eventually, I suggested that such behavior would not endear his people to the residents of the domains. Arturi responded by asking what would endear the Vistani to *giorgios*, and my failure to answer that question only confirmed his assertion that the Corvara are justified in their actions. To him, they simply did what was necessary to survive.

The Corvara may indeed be responsible for the reputation commonly attributed to all Vistani of our lands, for they are squatters who take advantage of any hospitality offered to them without offering anything of value in return. They are charming in the way of all Boemians, but their hearts are bitter, and their smiles are false. If they love the freedom of their kind, it is only because they have no choice but to embrace it. Of all the tribes in all the *tasques*, the Corvara seem to miss their homeland the most, yet there is no place for them in civilized society. These Vistani often earn our wrath, but we may have good reason to pity them, for they have not the Naiat's talents, nor the skills of the Kaldresh, nor the powers of the Manusa. They are truly the unwanted, the unloved, and there is little in them that could be considered redeeming.

The Corvara possess all the usual powers of the Vistani in general and the Boemians in particular, yet time spent among them is like camping with a band of highwaymen. They can be engaged as henchmen in a plot involving deception, but they may cheat and run unless they are convinced that fulfilling their part of any agreement leads to a greater reward. Depending on this tribe can complicate an adventure wherein Vistani skills are crucial to its success. While the motives and actions of all Vistani are viewed with suspicion by most people, the blatantly treacherous attitudes of the Corvara can drive adventurers to distraction.

The only skill specifically attributed to the Corvara is an ability to make skeleton keys. Given the opportunity to examine any nonmagical lock, a Corvara can produce a key that eliminates penalties of 25% or less to a thief's Open Locks rolls. Furthermore, any trap (magical or otherwise) that would normally be activated by failure to use the proper key does not go off when a skeleton key is used. Each key requires one day to construct, and it works only on the lock for which it was designed.

The Manusa

This *tasque* is the rarest met of all Vistani. I believe that merely a single caravan represents each tribe, for every account I have heard of them (and I grant there have been precious few) has included a description of one member or another. Though the salient characteristics varied somewhat, I have little doubt that each observer was describing the same persons. In fact, Manusa tribes are so small, they encompass perhaps five or six members and no children whatsoever. Perhaps they are slowly dying off, and one day there will be no more Manusa. On the other hand, one Manusa encounter I use as a source occurs in a diary penned by Shanshirron D'Oltier, a vampire of Chateaufaux, who existed a great many years ago!

I dared not ask any tribe members what their actual ages were, while I walked among them, for most questions to which I gave voice were answered with a mute grin or cryptic words that I could not understand. The firsthand information I have, I gathered either by observation, or from their lips without asking for it at all. They controlled every moment of my visits with them, and taught me what they deemed fit for my knowledge.

I never even learned any of their names—or even if they had names at all—except for that of the leader of the Zarovan tribe, the legendary Madame Eva herself.

Indeed, I have no idea why they allowed me into their midst, but if they

had not wanted my company, Arturi and I would never have found them. One cannot simply seek and locate a Manusa tribe, as one might seek an armorer to commission a breastplate; one must "happen" upon them. I suspect they can remain unseen at will. I myself only passed among them during the evening, and Arturi and I could not locate them by day.

Thoroughly asocial, the Manusa are never encountered near any city or village, nor do they speak to *giorgios* unless it be for their own, enigmatic reasons. Both the Kaldresh and the Boemians suffered my presence, I believe, because they wanted me to understand what they were in some small way. What reasons the Manusa had for briefly sharing their peculiar lifestyle with me are beyond my reckoning, and they are probably still chuckling among themselves at my conspicuous puzzlement.

A Manusa caravan typically consists of several *vardos*, one occupied exclusively by the leader of the tribe, and several more that are shared by the other members. Manusa *vardos* are not heavily weighted down with tools and wares to sell, as are those of the Kaldresh, nor are they painted so brightly as those of the Boemians. Functionality as a place to live seems to be their primary quality, and mobility does not appear to be a factor at all. In fact, although I noted that each *vardo* had a single horse tethered to it in camp, I have never actually seen a Manusa caravan rolling down a road. On this slimmest of evidence, I venture to guess that they travel strictly through *mist navigation*, which of course does not require them to physically move at all. If this is the case, then horses are unnecessary, except perhaps to shift the *vardos* to a slightly better position, once they have arrived in a new place.

For all the power and wile they possess, Manusa males appear unkempt and beggarly to the average observer. They wrap themselves in heavy woolen robes, bereft of decoration, which stretch down to their shoes and skim along the ground, clotting with dirt at the hem. The robes tend to lie open at the chest, revealing a vest of sorts, sewn with many small pockets into which they dip their fingers, drawing forth a pipe and a pinch of weed to smoke or some shimmering bit of magic. Upon their heads they wear a loosely woven wool cap that rises to a soft point. It is not much like a wizard's cap, yet the Manusa's obviously magical nature leads me to wonder if there is some connection between the conical shape and arcane power.

All men of the *tasque* allow their hair to grow down their backs. They do not shave their beards and moustaches either, and these reach prodigious lengths. They may never cut their hair at all. Beneath a tangle of bangs and bristly eyebrows, their eyes shine with a supernatural brightness that seems to pierce whatever they look upon. In stature they are shorter than average, leading the uninformed to conclude they are frail beings. The weathered grip of a Manusa man quickly dispels any

> The Manusa live with one foot in the campaign world and another in the Border Ethereal. At will, they can invoke upon the entire caravan the powers of a *wraithform* spell, becoming dim, shadowy forms that are not clearly visible except in bright sunlight. This ability does not allow them to pass into the Deep Ethereal and, thus, beyond the RAVENLOFT campaign setting. Rather, they use the ability to create a private haven, where they may remain unmolested by both *giorgios* and the dangers of the world at large.
>
> Van Richten confuses this *wraithform* ability with *mist navigation* (see Chapter Five), which it is not. The Manusa must still physically travel through the domains while in this form; they cannot use it to travel hundreds of miles in the blink of an eye. The advantage in using *wraithform* lies in remaining effectively invisible until a time of their choosing.

notion he is physically weak, however.

Females of the *tasque* are heavyset and fairly unattractive by *giorgio* standards. Their faces are well lined and somewhat puckered. The reader will form a good mental picture by imagining a dried potato with deep-set eyes, a large nose, and a thin-lipped mouth. When they smile, their teeth glisten and reveal wide gaps between them. Curiously, in spite of their apparent age they show not a single gray hair, but whether this is natural, arcane, or the result of dye I cannot say. (To ask so personal a question of this *tasque* would be sheer folly!)

Typically, female Manusa wrap colorful scarves over their heads. Their blouses are deep blue or purple silk, embroidered with many colored threads. Stitching patterns range from simple floral designs to complex, magical motifs. Their dresses are layered with several skirts which flow gracefully as they walk.

The most striking physical feature of all members of this *tasque* is their eerie eyes. When squinting, as is their constant habit, their eyes disappear almost completely within folds of leathery skin, but there is no doubt when they are trained on you, whether you can see them or not. You feel a Manusa's gaze looking straight through you as if you were glass. Sometimes a ghostly white light glows pale in the darkness of their sockets. They appear possessed by some luminescent being. If you are walking in some isolated place and you come upon a destitute beggar, search for a queer flash in his eyes before you decide whether to raise your hand or open it to him.

Attitudes and Behavior

This is a breed of people who have completely separated themselves from the rest of the world. Their society is entirely their own, and they obviously do not desire to share it with anyone. Even the other Vistani *tasques* find Manusa strange and unapproachable.

When outsiders make contact with the Manusa, they cannot hope to take

charge of the encounter, but must wait on the wisdom and judgment of those Vistani. Manusa powers are unmeasured, and their ability to inflict extreme misery with a curse should breed respect among the most puissant heroes. Effortlessly they held me in a state of awe and fear while I was among them.

Each time I came into contact with one of the Manusa tribes, they were already waiting for me. The Canjar fished Arturi and me out of the Arden River after we had decided to brave a set of rapids without a boat rather than face a werejaguar; "Right on time," one of them remarked as he dragged me from the water, half drowned. The Zarovan tribe I met when I fell into a hidden cave—as I came to a crashing halt at the bottom of a bumpy ride, Madame Eva herself handed me a cup of tea, freshly poured in anticipation of my arrival!

Even more disgruntling, after a few hours with each tribe, during which I mostly sat and listened and watched, I turned my attention away from them momentarily, only to look back on a different scene. Each tribe, having discharged its business with me, disappeared without a trace!

The demeanor of the Manusa leaves one with the impression that they are watchers of the world, separate from reality and largely unconcerned by it. Some special purpose places them in our world, some mission whose details go beyond the simple minds of *giorgios*.

An encounter with the Manusa should leave the heroes feeling like animals who vaguely realize that humans know something they do not. These Vistani never display an active interest in the affairs of heroes; when they play a part in an adventure, it is for their own reasons, which the heroes probably will not comprehend.

Tribes of this *tasque* simply appear when they find it convenient to do so, and disappear when their role has been fulfilled. Only under the most extraordinary circumstance would they allow a *giorgio* to spend any amount of time among them. The experience should be like living with aliens of a superior race.

If the Dungeon Master wishes to construct a fortune-telling scenario with the Manusa, the forecast should be by far the strangest, most cryptic babble any Vistani might utter. Interpreting their predictions should be both a matter of unscrambling the message as well as watching for clues that give sense to the words. For example, a Vistana of the Kaldresh or Boem *tasque* might say, "You will find your enemy when the raven's moon shines on his ebon blade" (whatever that means), but a Manusa would deliver the same prophecy by saying, "Black feather, white face, sword of darkness, foe's place," Interpretations, of course, are not considered necessary.

When the Manusa have tired of or finished with a group of heroes, they simply disappear while the adventurers are not looking.

They exhibit no compulsion to get along with others, no dependence on anyone, not even a need to convince others to do their bidding. They are breathing harbingers, the lips of Fate itself, and their predictions are inescapable, as if the events they foretell have already occurred.

Beliefs Concerning Time

Time itself is a toy to the Manusa, a faithful servant, a simpleton in their care. The most direct answer I received from any of the tribes was in response to the question, "What is time?" One old Canjari answered, quite casually, "It is nothing." Although I could not press her to elaborate, her tone conveyed a great deal more meaning than her words (as is always the case with this *tasque*). I understood her to mean that the nature of time is of no concern or mystery, that I might as well have asked, "What is the nature of water?" For the Manusa, there is no cumulative reality, no road of time, no need for analogies whatsoever; one either comprehends or he does not. And the Manusa certainly comprehend, while you and I do not.

Specific Powers

Control over time itself is the most amazing ability of the Manusa. Their full comprehension of its nature apparently allows them to merely look ahead or behind, without any dependence on tools such as the *tarokka*, *crystal ball*, or other mechanical means. From my experience among the Zarovan, I imagine they can see any time period in any place they choose.

If such is indeed the case, the Manusa could manipulate the past and future at will, creating any reality they desire! I marvel that they have not done so, and thereby placed themselves on the throne of the universe. I can only conclude that *giorgio* and Vistani minds must be two fundamentally different things.

Mist navigation: The Manusa seem to be at one with the strange mists that sometimes envelop our land. To most readers, these mists are little more nuisance than heavy fog, rising from the land by the cool of night. Others believe, however, that they are almost alive, and that they can carry a man from one domain to the next, even if he stands still from the moment they swallow him to the point they fade away.

Once I dismissed these claims as childish imagination, but now my own experience lends credence to the legends. The Kaldresh do not seem to heed the mists, and the Boemians travel with them wherever they blow, but the

The Manusa are capable of seeing into the past and future with near perfect clarity, but Van Richten overstates their prowess a bit. Specifically, in matters directly concerning themselves, they (and all Vistani) are either unable or unwilling to see beyond the present.

This fact is particularly important in light of their additional control over time, at which Van Richten hints: The Manusa can actually travel through time at will. They simply think about where in *time* they want to go (thus entering the Mists in the Demiplane of Dread campaign). Their grasp of time is so complete that they exist at any point in time by their own choosing. However, this does not mean they are in the habit of manipulating either time or events in the lives of adventurers—quite the opposite. Any plea to "go back in time and change the future" is met with disdain. Being able to operate independently of time, but unable to manipulate their part of "history," effectively disassociates the Vistani altogether.

Mechanically, the Dungeon Master can place the Manusa at any point in history necessary to explain some story element in an adventure. They can literally know anything, since they only need think about some point in time to be there.

This power can also be an enormously helpful tool in adventures where time plays a crucial element, but during which the adventurers fail to keep up. If the heroes are losing a race against time and the Dungeon Master wants them to have another chance, a Manusa caravan can carry them any place they need to be, and put them there yesterday, if need be.

Once again: Having this power does not dictate its use or abuse.

Manusa can direct them. If tales be true, this tribe can command that the mists carry their caravans to any precise time and place they choose, or even send the mists to do their bidding.

The Manusa can be a Dungeon Master's tool, deliberately invoking the Mists (in a Demiplane of Dread campaign) to relieve the monotony of constant coincidences when the Mists spring up to cast the heroes into another adventure. A new scenario can begin with an encounter with the Manusa, during which time the Manusa summon the Mists to either aid or punish the heroes.

Prescience: Because of their knowledge of time, it stands to reason that the Manusa can know who you are, what you have done in the past, and what you will do in the future. They can even know the moment of your death, if they care to look for it, but they would never reveal it to you. The only explanation I can offer for this lies in the legend of "The War for All Time" (see Chapter One): Their knowledge of time is a "secret" given up by the gods, who regret giving it to them. Perhaps the Manusa fear divine retribution should they share their secrets with anyone else. Whatever the reason, I think it is probably all for the best that they keep such knowledge to themselves. I, for one, do not care to know what they do.

The Defining Craft

I would generally refer to the Manusa as "arcanists," if label them I must. All Vistani are magical to some extent, but this *tasque* is overtly so. While all Vistani cast the *tarokka*, time is no mystery to this *tasque*. All Vistani travel using *mist navigation*, but the Manusa do so with apparent ease.

While the Kaldresh produce goods for consumption by the military and the general public, and the Boemians provide services for *giorgios*' entertainment and other goals, the Manusa do not share their "craft" with anyone unless it be for their own purposes. One cannot engage a Manusa to read one's fortune, nor ask him to ferry passengers through *mist*

navigation. No amount of gold can sway him, and a personal entreaty must be extremely convincing. The Manusa are unaffected by politics, religion, love, hate, idealism, cynicism—by all the causes and beliefs which drive most of us all our lives. If you are approached by a member of this *tasque*, I would heartily recommend that you listen very carefully to everything he says, follow any instructions he gives you to the best of your ability, and do not ask for anything if you can help it. If you are lucky, the Manusa will have a positive effect on your life, but even when they prove to be the bane of your existence, you can do little but embrace the will of Fate.

Van Richten's observation regarding the Manusa's potential omniscience is included purely for dramatic effect, although it can be of use in play under the right circumstances. In effect, the Manusa know anything the Dungeon Master knows. This can be used as a last-resort game mechanic for revealing information to adventurers who somehow miss all the clues put in their paths. However, its main effect is to make the Vistani a bit more frightening and intimidating. They know what the heroes fear and desire, and they have information that most heroes would wish they did not. When the Manusa look on a character who knows what they are, he should have the uncomfortable feeling that they are thinking about events he would rather forget, or perhaps they are contemplating the character's death.

As Van Richten suggests, the Manusa do not trade in coin, unless it serves a secondary purpose. Perhaps, in return for their services, they might tell a party to recover a valuable gem; however, the adventurers must kill a particular person or monster in order to get it, and that being's death is what the Manusa really want. They cannot be bought at any price, for in general they need nothing. Whom they serve, if anyone (or anything), is known only to them.

When I muse on those Manusa powers which I have witnessed, then speculate on the possible range and application of those abilities, I am as dumbfounded as I was when I began to learn about the salient powers of vampires, so long ago. Were these people as evil as *giorgios* suspect them to be, then the most terrible monsters in the universe would be mere pets to them. Truly it is by the grace of the gods that the Vistani do not ply their capabilities with a vengeance!

The Canjar

That some beings possess the powers of the Manusa and those of a spellcaster as well is a humbling thought, but such is the nature of the Canjar. Imagine the possibilities: No matter how powerful a wizard becomes, he is rendered useless to himself and others if he has not memorized the proper spell. With the power to predict the future, the Canjar can theoretically arm themselves with the exact spell needed for every occasion. They waste not so much as an ounce of power, and that is only the first advantage they enjoy. I shall not waste ink detailing how the Canjar profit from their natural abilities, for a mere wizard's apprentice could fill a book.

Sadly, I have had precious little time to observe them, but I believe the Canjar are capable of casting any

enchantment a *giorgio* spellcaster can undertake. The manifold tiny pockets in their vests, to which I referred earlier, are ideal receptacles for spell components. I did note that their fingers dip in and out of them with extraordinary alacrity. What makes their magic different is that it seems to have a life of its own.

All members of the Canjar tribe are generalist mages, reaching a maximum of 6th level. If such a Vistana is in the position of becoming an adversary to the heroes, the Dungeon Master should take care in choosing the nonplayer character's level. Since a Canjar can, in effect, "glance ahead" and know which spells he'll need for the day, the Dungeon Master can simply choose his spells from the *Player's Handbook* or *Tome of Magic* at the time of casting, employing whatever spell is best suited to the immediate situation. This certainly increases the effective potency of a Canjar wizard.

The Living Night

Arturi and I were crossing the rainy blue domain of Sithicus, which is ruled by a powerful knight called Soth. Night smothered us like the ceaseless wet mists that seeped through my wool coat and sapped my warmth. We had abandoned hope for contact with the Manusa and turned our ambitions to finding a tribe of the native elves instead. It had been a wearisome journey west from Skald; three days through Kartakass and three more in Sithicus, and all we had seen was a pack of starved ghouls and a massive flight of bats winging north. The rocky, tumbling Musarde River rolled noisily along to our left as we followed the road to Har-Thelen, often teasing us by making us think we heard the coarse grind of wagon wheels somewhere nearby.

All of a sudden, I began to sense something alive in the darkness. Arturi sensed it also, so we paused and armed ourselves against an ambush. My skin prickled sharply as I probed the shapeless void about me with some sixth sense of mine (which I had begun to cultivate after a few meetings with the Vistani). Whatever I sensed, it was all around me—not "they," but "it;" I was sure that a single presence closed about us as our eyes darted here and there, seeking the invisible menace.

The darkness itself began to feel sticky, clinging, as if it were thickening into a dank sheet that bodily wrapped about us and began to constrict. With a gasp, Arturi beside me dropped his weapon.

"It is the night itself!" he cried. "The darkness is alive!"

In spite of considerable experience which taught me that carrying a torch in the open night is foolhardy, I began to grope frantically in my pack for my magical lantern.

—From the private journal of
Dr. Van Richten

Arturi has had no experience with Canjar magic, but he knows many *doroq* tales about these distant cousins of his. One tale insists that Canjar magic is actually alive. Most people might call this a metaphor or romantic conceit, but I have walked the night too long to dismiss such ideas as mere fancy. As it happens, when I finally met the Canjar, I had not yet made the connection between that sticky darkness and their subsequent appearance. I remarked that I had no idea how I managed to find them.

A grizzled Vistani crone grinned toothlessly at me and replied, "We sent *zsalev* to fetch you. The breath of night blew you to us." *Zsalev* is a Canjar word with no direct translation, but which means, roughly, "magic" or "power." I told her the night had come to life, and she nodded enthusiastically. She might have merely recognized the sensation, but I prefer to think she was saying I was exactly right.

I now believe the Canjar sent this *zsalev*, this living darkness, to harass Arturi and me on the Har-Thelen road. It

Canjar *Zsalev*

The Canjar can create effects called *zsalev* (ZHA lef, singular and plural) that resemble more common spells such as *invisible stalker* or *unseen servant*. The manifestation has a tangible presence that can be felt like eyes staring at the back of your head. Once created, a *zsalev* "lives" for one week before fading away. As soon as one comes into being, its creator concentrates on a face and a general direction, whereupon the effect sets off at a movement rate of 36 (A), seeking out the object of the creator's thought. In addition, one basic command may be implanted in it, such as "Bring him back" or "Drive her toward water;" this decree becomes the manifestation's only function. If no command is given, it merely seeks out the target and hovers about him until it "dies," is driven away by any light source of torch brightness or more (returning at next darkness), or is magically dispelled.

A *zsalev* cannot physically attack or be attacked; it can only create a *fear* effect. Anyone within 30 feet of the effect must make a saving throw vs. spell each round, with a +2 bonus on the first attempt, a +1 bonus on the second, no bonus on the third, and so on, decreasing no farther than –5. An affected character runs in the direction the *zsalev*'s creator wishes, or in a random direction if the *zsalev* has no directive.

A *zsalev* can take many forms, and the Dungeon Master should create his own to surprise the players. Van Richten and Arturi were affected by living darkness, but they might have been stalked by a growling cat, a greenish cloud of mist, the sound of monstrous, heavy breathing nearby, or any other unnerving bump in the night.

A *zsalev* is not a spell so much as a spell-like ability, but it requires the Vistana creator to waste the power needed to cast one memorized 3rd-level spell in order to invoke it.

actually sniffed us out and drove us toward them in Valachan. The spell traveled some four hundred miles to find us! As Vistani, the Canjar are capable of working the forge, but they do not share the Kaldresh enthusiasm and talent for it. Nevertheless, they do produce two very special types of finely wrought magical items: moon jewelry and *evil eye* amulets.

Canjar Moon Jewelry

The Canjar do not sell moon jewelry, but they might award it as a prize for service rendered. Each disk's XP value is 1,000; no more than two such items should be introduced into any single adventuring group.

Moon jewelry modifies any saving throw vs. spell in favor of the caster by +1 while the moon is waxing, and by +2 for the three days during which the moon is full. The modification works against the caster by –1 during waning weeks, and by –2 for the night of the new moon. Determine the moon's current phase by consulting a calendar: The real moon's phase indicates the phase in the game. If your adventure specifies the phase of the moon for plot purposes, that should take precedence. Note that some domains, such as Bluetspur and the Nightmare Lands, do not have a moon, and the jewelry does not function in such places.

Obviously, the possession of moon jewelry is a mixed blessing. Worse, the owner cannot put on the bauble one week to enjoy its benefits and remove it later to avoid its drawbacks. Once moon jewelry has affected even a single roll of the dice, it continues to influence the wearer for one month, even if removed.

Just 10% of all moon jewelry conveys power over lycanthropes. Such items perform as a *scroll of protection versus lycanthropes*, usable once per day. A Dungeon Master can build an adventure around a quest to find a moon ring that cures lycanthropy, but there should be only one of these in an entire campaign.

Moon Jewelry

Under almost any light, these bits of enchanted work appear to be little silver disks; each may be mounted as a pendant, ring, or other device. In the dark, or under the moon, their surfaces glow in proportions that perfectly match the phase of that heavenly body. During the first and last weeks of the lunar cycle, moon jewelry glows in a waxing or waning crescent, while at the full it beams circular and nearly bright enough to read by. According to Arturi, such items can enhance spellcasting and even have power over lycanthropy!

Evil Eye Amulets

In Chapter Four of this treatise, I shall discuss the infamous *evil eye*, but here I shall merely point out that the Canjar create amulets which can actually protect one from that fell power. Forged of silver, such a charm is shaped like a human hand in a warding gesture, such as a fist with the index and little fingers extended. When the charm is worn on a chain about the neck, the wearer's actual warding gesture is enhanced, making it possible to repel not only attacks of the *evil eye*, but any assault that is delivered through the eyes.

Among non-Vistani, *evil eye amulets* are very rare. Given the Manusa's disdain for outsiders, and the *giorgio* dismissal of Vistani powers as superstition, this rarity is perhaps expected. Not even Arturi owns an *evil eye amulet*, even though Vistani tend to be more susceptible to the *evil eye* than you or I.

The Zarovan

The last tribe I shall describe is the furthest removed from common mortality. I do not mean to imply they are not human, just that "humanity" is too limited to encompass them. They are like visitors from another world, full of knowledge we can never hope to imagine, possessed of powers we dare not think on.

The Zarovan are said to be named for their connection with Lord Zarovich of Barovia, also known as "the devil Strahd." Though I have not had the honor of Lord Zarovich's acquaintance, I know enough of him to infer that members of his inner circle must be both terrible and powerful. If the Zarovan are part of that group, then I am fortunate indeed to have spent a few hours in their presence and lived to speak of it.

Canjar *Evil Eye* Amulets

Evil eye amulets are more rare than moon jewelry, so no more than one is appropriate to any given party unless extraordinary circumstances dictate otherwise. Further, the jewelry is limited to 1d4+2 "charges," one of which is expended each time the item is used, regardless of its success or failure. Note that *evil eye* amulets should not be treated as standard magical items, but as objects with curious and inexplicable powers. For an amulet to have maximum dramatic effect, the Dungeon Master should keep track of its remaining charges so the player cannot completely depend on it.

Furthermore, when a hero receives an *evil eye* amulet, the Dungeon Master rolls percentile dice to determine the exact bonus to "*evil eye* checks" (see Chapter Four).

Evil Eye Amulet Bonus

1d100	Bonus
01–50	+1
51–75	+2
76–90	+3
91–00	+4

If and when an adventurer responds to an attack of the *evil eye* with a warding gesture, the Dungeon Master (not the player) makes a saving throw vs. paralyzation and adds the modifier.

Note that cursed amulets might be given to adventurers as well. Using the above rules and substituting minuses for pluses, a character may become even more susceptible to the *evil eye*. Such objects are usually put into the hands of heroes for specific reasons germane to the adventure, but any disrespect for the Vistani can result in such a "gift."

At first I called out to the stranger in the foggy shadows of the Barovian woods. The sun had not yet set, after all, and in all my years I had become a match for most twilight dangers. I hoped the person lurking deep in the trees was a Zarovani. Arturi and I entered the infamous "choking fog of Barovia" knowing that once we inhaled the insidious yellowish fumes, only a Vistani's special potions would neutralize the latent poison in our lungs.

Foolishly, Arturi and I left the Old Svalich Road to answer the stranger's invitation. Soon we were lost, then separated. The stranger slipped from cover to cover, so close I could have seized him, yet I was too late. It became apparent that I was not the hunter, but the prey. Darkness dropped like a heavy curtain, stranding me in the dense forest, the movement of unidentified creatures all around me. I struggled through the underbrush, stumbled on a pit, and fell headlong into a cave, only to be handed a cup of hot tea by a waiting Vistana.

"I am Eva," she said quite casually, then turned and walked away as if we had just finished a conversation.

—From the private journal of Dr. Van Richten

I can only guess at the powers of the Zarovan, for they told me nothing of themselves. Even the Canjar, mysterious as they seemed, confirmed that certain experiences of mine had been the result of their magic. The Zarovan acknowledged nothing. I cannot say why they even allowed me into their presence, except perhaps to reinforce my fears of the Vistani, lest I report to you that the mysterious wanderers were in any way approachable.

I wanted to rise and walk among them, to ask a dozen questions at once, to simply thank them for sheltering me from the darkness outside. Instead, I sat on the dirt-strewn floor of the cave with a cup of tea in my hand, and I watched mutely. In hindsight, I suspect they somehow prevented me from acting, yet I had no impression then of external control.

Eva sat in a chair, and a fire sprang up from the stone floor before her. The tribe gathered around her and the fire, chanting, singing, and bowing in ritual eloquence. Their words I could not understand, yet emotions and intellectual impressions filled my head with hallucinations.

I looked into the halls of the lords themselves! I saw other worlds, inhabited by both familiar and alien races! A gigantic, flying, reptilian worm that could breathe fire spoke to me like a human! I gazed on city streets built on the inside of a colossal ring! It all seemed so real, I shall never be sure it was not

I have the oddest feeling that not a single second passed while I was among the Zarovan. Although everything I have described above should have required time to occur, I am positive that my evening among them lasted no longer than the moments it takes to remember it all. One instant I was tumbling down that hole in the Barovian night, and the next I was sitting with Arturi at my kitchen table in Mordentshire, hundreds of miles away, with the same cup of tea in my hand—still full and still hot!

—From the private journal of Dr. Van Richten

Given my experience with the Zarovan, the best information I can give consists of rumors, most coming from Arturi. My unenlightened observations of my brief visit with them are hardly the rock of fact. The only assurance I can give you is a personal certainty that none of what I shall below ascribe to the Zarovan seems far-fetched to me since I spent that strange evening among them.

The Spirit of All Vistani

Arturi did not like to say so, perhaps because the prospect of this truth is too much to bear, but he explained to me

There are a number of ways a Dungeon Master might incorporate this notion into a campaign. The Zarovan can possess any and all abilities of all other Vistani tribes of every *tasque*. They might know anything that any other Vistani knows. They might have the ability to negate the powers of other Vistani. They might simply appear as any kind of itinerant they choose.

If the Vistani are to remain mysterious and intimidating to adventurers, then a tribe such as the Zarovan is necessary. These "masters" can change the rules for all the tribes, to prevent the heroes from being able to depend on any one thing being true all the time. This is not to say that the Dungeon Master should make a practice of deceiving the characters at every turn; rather, the party must not ever experience the comfort of knowing exactly with whom they deal.

that the Zarovan are believed to the source of all Vistani powers. According to one Boem legend, a band of Vistani stole magic from the darkest gods, weakening the divine beings' powers so that they could not destroy the world. Ironically yet understandably, other mortals came to fear these folk, and they were no longer welcome anywhere. They became nomads; they shared their suspicious powers with all wanderers, to frighten and punish ungrateful *giorgios* everywhere.

Sometime later, as we walked along the trail and discussed Vistani mythology, Arturi reluctantly explained that one who was fluent in the *patterna* (see Chapter Three) would understand that the story referred subtly to the Zarovan. He did not wish to discuss the matter because he believed that they know when they are talked about, and further, who is talking about them, which made him very uncomfortable.

Portal to the Fantastic

If the places I saw in my reverie are real, it is almost certain that the Zarovan can travel to them, either spiritually or through *mist navigation*. Perhaps they even bring back people from those remote locales; I have many times met people who insist that they came from abroad, yet who knew not how they arrived nor how to return whence they came. Perhaps they were in actuality objects of Vistani

The Dungeon Master decides whether the Zarovan have the capability to part the void between the campaign world and other worlds and planes. If such a feat is possible, the Zarovan can accomplish it.

Unfortunately for adventurers, there is no way they can pay, cajole, or force the Vistani to open that portal. The only way in which the opportunity might arise is if the Zarovan want something of them badly enough to offer passage using *mist navigation* instead of any number of other boons. They do not allow adventurers to treat this ability as a bargaining chip ("Sure, we'll retrieve the *sword of Sentor* from the Shadow Rift, but you have to take us back to Cormyr when we've done it"), nor do they even admit to having the power. The most they do is hint, saying something like, "Fate calls on you to deliver the *sword of Sentor* before the home fire burns for you once more."

An offer this generous is cheapened if used as the reward for a single adventure. Far better is it to have the Zarovan appear in the midst of an ongoing campaign, predict some obscure event that results in the way home, then disappear again. When the RAVENLOFT campaign nears an end, the Dungeon Master can allow the party to fulfill the prediction either incidentally or as the final mission. If this encounter with the Zarovan is roleplayed with proper drama, the conditions of the prediction that frees them can be used to tease the adventurers for years. For example, if the Zarovan predict, "The home forge lies beyond the ivory sunset," the heroes will be excited every time they see ivory or hear of it.

machinations, rather than slightly mad, as I first took them to be.

Conclusion

That, to my knowledge, is the extent of the Vistani tribes which live in our realms, although there may be still others of which neither Arturi nor I know anything. Some *doroq* stories suggest that there is a lost tribe of Vistani which went away using *mist navigation* and never came back; presumably they traveled to another world or plane of existence, never to be seen in our domains again. More chilling stories speak of a ghostly tribe that steals lives and commits other acts of evil when the moon is in the proper phase, allowing them to cross over the shadowy border between this world and theirs. By all accounts, these ghostly Vistani are purely wicked, but I suspect that they are nothing more than boogeymen with which the Kaldresh frighten their children.

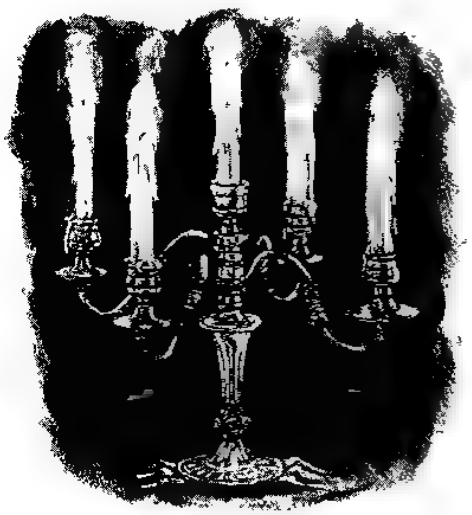
In any event, it is certain that all Vistani are not alike. Of course there are certain qualities and abilities that are common to all of them: Physically they are swarthy, dark-haired, and brown-eyed almost without exception, which I am sure contributes to generalizations on the part of the uninformed. All tribes practice a bit of magic, as well, and have the power to glimpse the future through various means. Any tribe can use *mist navigation* to emerge in another domain, hundreds of miles away, as if it were just down the road. None can claim a permanent home without losing an essential part of their identities. And, of course, all Vistani possess the power of the *evil eye*, which confers on them the ability to lay dread curses.

When adventurers and old wives exchange information, these are the traits they ascribe to the Vistani, and few others. However, these are only the most spectacular of their capabilities, and they are the stories which typically frighten *giorgios*. The actuality of these powers are addressed in Chapters Four and Five of this treatise. They do much to secure a reputation, for good or ill, that is attributed to all Vistani. Yet by themselves, these abilities do not reveal who or what the Vistani really are.

Although I have a personal grievance with the Corvara tribe, which stole my son and sold him to a vampire, I must still conclude that the majority of evils attributed to Vistani tribes are simply stuff and nonsense. Certainly there are criminals among them, worthy of a swift rope, and most of them view law and order as concepts that have no direct application to their lives, but the all too common depiction of these familial vagabonds as a collection of derelicts and thieves is misleading.

If there is one thing I have learned in my many years of research and hunting, it is that misleading information can be fatal. Perhaps, if I had not viewed the Radanavich caravan with such awe and fear, they would not have been so bold as to take my son, and countless friends and associates of mine would still be alive today.

> It is vital for the Dungeon Master to vary the abilities of the many tribes, trade some of them back and forth, and even create other related powers and skills, using Van Richten for inspiration only. Now that many players have the doctor's take on the Vistani, prove to them that neither he nor they know everything.



. . . (H)onor, love, obedience, troop of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep . . .

—William Shakespeare
Macbeth

Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,
And cursed me with his eye.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge
"Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

CHAPTER FOUR: CURSES AND THE EVIL EYE

The power to lay curses, and the related power of the *evil eye*, fall somewhere between common and salient Vistani abilities. I name them "common" because all Vistani can invoke them, and I call them "salient" as well because they are devastating capabilities. For all the strange and frightening things these people can do, their abilities to curse and to cast the *evil eye* are what makes them so dangerous.

Curse Types

I shall not expend a great deal of ink speaking of curses. Not only is the subject distasteful, but I have found that a great deal of empirical data regarding the nature of these phenomena has already been committed to print.

Just as the bite is integral to the notion of a vampire, the curse is essential to the Vistani. Further, their curses are more calculated, often more complex in their workings, and ironically more natural than those uttered by *giorgios* with hatred in their hearts. The Vistani can invoke curses without the electrifying ingredient of hatred.

A certain consciousness of this ability should pervade any contact with the Vistani. Just as the flash of a fang warns of mortal danger (to extend the vampire analogy), so *giorgios* must learn to recognize the sparkle of temper in a Vistana's smiling countenance if they know what is good for them. In the interests of the discovery of truth, I have suppressed my inclinations to ignore this subject. Toward this end, I interviewed a few priests who have dealt with Vistani curses, and of course Arturi, my resident expert, regarding the

> Van Richten's anxiety over curses is slightly overstated because of his own experiences. The Vistani do not lock eyes with *giorgios* and smile evilly, as if they were saying, "Go ahead. Make my day." On the other hand, the Vistani have a substantially superior chance to invoke curses. First, they earn +25% to their percentile rolls simply for being Vistani. Good Dungeon Masters (and any players running Vistani characters) should make the actual uttering of a curse dramatic, allowing an additional +25% for showmanship. Of course, if a particular curse is a focal plot point, it is perfectly reasonable to assign a 100% chance of the curse taking affect.
>
> Curses uttered during Fulltide gain a +10% chance to take effect.
>
> In general, all the rules concerning curses in *Domains of Dread* (Chapter Twelve) apply to the Vistani. For example, Dungeon Masters should make powers checks for Vistani who curse, especially if that character plays an extended role in the campaign. (A failed check can add some interesting spice to an adventure.)

Vistani curses are categorized by their specific intent, as well as by type and strength—defined in *Domains of Dread*, Chapter Twelve, as *embarrassing, frustrating, troublesome, dangerous*, and *lethal*. In fact, mixing and matching the intent and strength of curses creates interesting results. Therefore, the relative strength of curses is applied to each of the following curses below in order to help the Dungeon Master invent appropriate and interesting Vistani curses.

nature of this cruel power. Thus I learned that Vistani curses can be loosely categorized by the type of punishment they inflict. This corroborates my comments above, for it makes sense that the Vistani would calculate the effects of their curses rather than simply blither in a fury and let their power take its own form.

The Scar

Most curses uttered by Vistani are not intended to kill or jeopardize the victim's life. They are simply cruel repayment for a perceived injustice, real or imaginary. These hardships take the form of permanent inconveniences, for lack of a better description. They have the effect of leaving a physical, emotional, or psychological scar on the victim, to constantly remind him that he has wronged the Vistani. For example, a warrior's prowess with the sword may weaken, or a mage's ability to enunciate may fail when casting a spell.

These curses do not always affect the victim himself: A *giorgio* blacksmith who undercuts a Kamii's bid for work might suddenly find that every nail he forges becomes brittle, and a sage who scorns the Vistani might discover that ink no longer flows from a quill whenever he attempts to use it. The object of the "scar" is not to cause real harm so much as to interfere with some aspect of the victim's daily life. Certainly it is possible for such curses to take on a deadly aspect—say, for instance, a priest whose holy symbol becomes slippery whenever he faces an undead creature—but the general intent is not lethal.

The Poisonous Carrot

What is more cruel than to want something with all one's heart, to see that something right before one's eyes, but to know that the mere touch of it is death? When a Vistana feels especially cheated and wants to repay his pain in Vistani-kind, he lays a curse that implants desire in the heart of his enemy, but also the knowledge that to have the desired object is to summon torment or worse. The point of this curse is to make the recipient experience the Vistana's sense of loss, keenly and perpetually. If the Vistana knows of something already dear to the victim, that object often becomes the focus of the curse, doubling the retribution.

Doombringer

How shall I repay the blood of my many comrades who have lost their lives because of my ignorance? What justice can atone for the deaths of so many, who were doomed the moment they

Most Vistani curses laid on adventurers are "Scars," or curses meant to be broken, either as a sidelight of an on-going adventure or as the final goal itself. To tailor a curse to a hero, hinder the character's class or race abilities. Assign penalties to dice rolls in mild situations and revoke the skill or faculty altogether for serious curses (troublesome or worse). A more clever curse focuses on some individual aspect of the blighted character—something comparable to Van Richten's examples of the blacksmith and the sage.

While "scar" curses can lead to the death of a hero in combination with a bad turn of luck, this type of annoyance should not be designed to create permanent problems. As soon as it is broken, a "scar" curse ceases to have an effect.

accepted me as a companion? Is there any hope for me to live with myself?

So many dead; so many taken in ways that have plotted my nightmares for three decades!

—From the private journal of Dr. Van Richten

The coldness with which a Vistana can deliver a curse is highly unsettling in itself, aside from the prospect of the curse's effects on its hapless victim. One would almost prefer that they scream or babble maliciously rather than hiss deadly words with cool, calculated venom.

At least, that seems to be the case as one thinks about the alternatives. As one who has seen the rage of a Vistana directed on him, I can tell you that a curse laid in fury is even more terrifying. Angry Vistani become like murderous Nature, like a tornado that comes and goes in seconds, changing the life of a tiny mortal forever.

When a Vistana is enraged, he is capable of responding with particular cruelty. His desire is not only to punish his enemy, but to torment him for as long as possible, inspiring guilt and remorse that is far worse than mere agony. In other words, the "doom-bringer" curse does not affect the

An embarrassing example of this curse creates a strange but easily avoidable compulsion. For example, the victim might find candy of any type irresistible (failing a saving throw vs. paralyzation), but eating a single piece results in a debilitative stomachache (–2 to dice rolls) that lasts 1d8 hours.

A frustrating curse focuses on a victim's favorite possession, causing it to malfunction 50% of the time, or to deliver 2d4 points of damage by electrical shock whenever it is used, or something similar.

A troublesome curse might force a hero to irresistibly prefer weapons, magical items, or equipment with which he is not proficient. When in battle the chance arises to heft an inappropriate weapon, the character does—and must use his choice until the encounter ends.

A dangerous curse compels the victim to crave peril. Hence, the Dungeon Master might require a hero who comes on a 10-foot-wide gorge to successfully make a saving throw vs. paralyzation or resolve to leap across, rather than wait for a more sensible plan to develop.

The lethal curse should focus on whatever the character cherishes most, and pronounce a death sentence upon possessing it. This might separate a paladin from his horse or *holy sword*, or it might forbid the victim from ever leaving the RAVENLOFT world, and so forth.

The "poisonous carrot" curse is most useful when a particular hero has a favorite object. The Dungeon Master can apply any severity of curse to it, making it difficult to use, live with, touch, or even look on. Take care not to ruin the adventurer's attachment to the item, though! Metaphorically speaking, the Dungeon Master should dangle the cursed object over his hero's head (like a carrot in front of a burro) where the hero can see it, but not quite reach it. Remind indignant players that curses can be broken, and they'll want to get back into the game immediately.

An enraged Vistana is likely to inflict this type of misfortune.

An embarrassing "doombringer" is merely annoying to have around—he is followed by poor weather wherever he goes, for example.

A frustrating curse creates measurable (dice-affecting) troubles for others, but if the victim and all allies are aware of it, they can work around it. Hence, the cursed character might be the walking center of a 25-foot-radius magic-dead zone (his own magic excepted).

A troublesome curse causes people in the victim's vicinity to experience unavoidable but nonlethal difficulties; perhaps everyone with the victim automatically fails all surprise rolls.

A dangerous "doombringer" attracts potentially lethal trouble on a regular basis. Maybe particularly nasty monsters show up once per day if the Dungeon Master rolls 1–3 on 1d10 (check once per hour until it happens).

A lethal curse brings certain death to those around the victim. This is the specific curse leveled at Van Richten by the Vistani long ago.

victim, but everyone around him instead. He becomes a carrier of some mystical disease to which he is immune. Normally, it does not take a long time for the victim to notice a pattern of devastating bad luck. However, I can personally assure that such a curse may be subtle, rendering the discovery of its existence all the more ruinous!

Alienation

Contempt in a Vistana's heart can spawn a sadistic type of curse. The victim slowly takes on the Vistana's image of him, becoming more vile to look on as time marches forward. We all know the story of the thief whose hands turned black after he stole from a caravan, but I have also heard of men slowly turning into dumb animals, and others becoming trees. Some changes are only partial, leaving the victim a revolting or fearsome visage; other times a complete evolution occurs. In one odd tale, a man's shadow disappeared, even in the brightest light, for lack of which he was burned at the stake by his frightened fellow villagers.

Torture and Terror

For those who commit particularly heinous crimes (including murder, kidnapping, and rape) against the Vistani, there are horrible curses which only a tribe's seer can invoke. What's worse, one need not even be in the same domain, much less in their presence, to be struck down by these black maledictions for which, to my knowledge, there is no cure.

Most infamous of these punishments is the notorious *mishamel* (mee SHAH mall), the body-melt. Casualties of this dread pronouncement begin to sweat

***Mishamel* Curse**

The victim of a *mishamel* experiences profuse perspiration for 1d4 days. For the next 1d4 days, the victim cannot be healed by any means short of a *wish* spell. Next, the victim suffers a cumulative –1 per day penalty to all dice rolls due to mounting pain. Furthermore, the victim must successfully make a saving throw vs. petrification or lose 1 point each of Strength, Dexterity, and Constitution per day. When any attribute falls to 0, the character goes into shock and melts away in 1d6 hours. Melted characters are irrevocably destroyed and cannot be brought back even with a *wish*.

The Dungeon Master is encouraged to alter the numbers and even the symptoms of a *mishamet* if adopting it for his campaign. The mechanics given here demonstrate how dice can be applied to the effects of so terrible a curse. At the Dungeon Master's option, *remove curse* can temporarily halt the curse's advance (see Chapter Eight in *Domains of Dread*). However, the real terror lies in the roleplayed aspects of the *mishamel*.

As Van Richten suggests, this type of curse can impose physical changes in the victim. The severity of this curse is just as flexible as that of the other curse types.

An embarrassing curse results in an irritant fairly simply to deal with—the example of the thief with black hands falls into this category, as he can always wear gloves in public.

A frustrating curse is the same as an embarrassing one, except that it physically affects the victim in some minor way: The thief's fingers grow numb as well as black (–10% to all hand-related thief skills).

Continuing the thief's example, a troublesome curse would result in some physical problem that prevents him from using one of his skills altogether. He could develop a hitch in his step that prevents him from Moving Silently, or his remaining skin might turn so white that he can no longer Hide in Shadows.

A dangerous curse causes a deformity that changes the victim's life: The thief's hands rot away, or turn into the claws of a weasel.

Finally, a lethal curse turns the victim into another object entirely, animate or inanimate.

Allow an adventurer afflicted with this type of curse to change slowly. Let it dawn on him that a curse has taken effect. Make him guess at the nature of the change by revealing only symptoms, one at a time, spread over a generous stretch of time. Do not apply modifiers to any dice rolls at first; eventually do so in such a way that the player has to figure out it is happening, if possible. When the player notices his character's rolls are being altered, that is the cue to announce the first visible change.

It is possible to apply reaction adjustments to this type of curse as well. Assess a cumulative –1 penalty per stage of severity whenever such rolls are made. As a rule of thumb, a reaction adjustment is definitely in order whenever nonplayer character humans and demihumans witness the manifestation of the curse.

profusely, then experience increasing pain, which steadily erodes their abilities to think and act, until they finally go into shock. Their physical bodies are slowly melting into a gooey liquid! It is fortunate they are not conscious the last hours of their lives, for the sight of their own flesh would engender a heart attack.

Other Vistani death sentences are legendary, both literally and figuratively, since I have no personal knowledge of any, nor have I interviewed a reliable source who could bear witness to the events. These include a dissolution of the skeleton which leaves the victim fully alive, yet incapable of retaining anything more than a baglike form; an irresistibility to stinging, swarming insects; a full-body case of gangrene; violent hallucinations that actually inflict physical damage; and even a suit of armor that slowly contracted, crushing the wearer bit by tiny bit.

Focus Items

To invoke a lethal curse, a Vistana seer often needs a material component of some sort. Ideally, this is a possession of the victim's such as an

Although Van Richten pronounces these curses "incurable," his insistence contradicts the rule that every curse has an escape clause (see later). Perhaps it is more accurate to say that these curses have no known cure. Therefore, it is up to the Dungeon Master to decide on a fitting one. Since *mishamels* are only laid on those who truly deserve them, likely no one wants to offer a cure. On the other hand, an incurable curse can be an effective way to threaten a character who flouts powers checks. If his act of evil injures the Vistani, even inadvertently, an unrepentant adventurer can experience some particularly horrible retribution.

article of clothing or lock of hair, but it can be any object which the intended victim has held in the last day or so. Sometimes the seer creates a doll or other image, or she takes an animal's heart and drives spikes through it. This procedure adds power to the curse, and I think it allows the seer to fester in her wrath while she constructs the conduit. She can focus on the object of her hatred with increasing clarity, which helps to drive the curse home.

When the focus item is complete, the Vistana holds it over a fire and pronounces the name of the victim. Then she digs a shallow hole, places the object within, spits on it, and buries it, pronouncing the name once more. As she turns her back on the tiny grave, the curse begins to work.

If a cursing Vistana has an item that belongs to the victim, add +25% to the curse's chance of taking effect. If the item has merely been touched by the target, add only +15% to the roll. A simple representation adds just +5%. Horrifying curses are wonderful tools to scare heroes, when they are skillfully employed. Most important, the manifestation of the curse must develop slowly. Introduce the symptoms gradually so that it takes a while for the adventurers to figure out exactly what is happening, even if the character is aware that he's been cursed. Once a curse's true nature is detected (horror checks might be advisable), drag out determining the method of breaking the curse (see later) until the symptoms have reached alarming proportions. Then challenge the heroes to achieve their goal by giving them a genuine chance to succeed or fail, depending on how well they play. Strike a careful balance between hope and despair by dangling the cure in plain sight, while keeping it just out of reach.

As dictated in *Domains of Dread*, Chapter Twelve, each curse must contain an escape clause, or it is little more than a death sentence or permanent handicap. Determining exactly what breaks a curse is at least as important as the curse itself, because what breaks the curse often defines the whole (new) direction of the campaign. A cursed character likely ignores all previous objectives until the curse is broken. At the Dungeon Master's option, a clever adventurer might earn a 50% chance to shatter a curse by creating a paradox within which the curse cannot operate. Note that "redemption" in a Vistani curse amounts to righting whatever wrong has been committed, for the Vistani can withdraw their curses at will.

Breaking a Curse

Apparently the Vistani have the power to withdraw their curses at will. However, they must truly wish to end the torment, and they cannot be threatened or coerced into doing so.

Even if they are not disposed to forgive, I believe that there is often a way to turn a curse in on itself, and thus destroy it. Those who suffer from a curse would do well to examine the exact words (providing they were present when the words were uttered),

for there is a good possibility that some loophole exists. Theoretically, once it becomes impossible for a curse to manifest itself, the hex shatters. Therefore, concentrate on words such as "if, when, until, by, because," and any others that create a conditional phrase. Keep in mind that merely avoiding the behavior that triggers a curse is not the same as making circumstances impossible for the curse to manifest. Rather, the trick is to determine the condition that causes the curse, then alter that condition in such a way that the curse cannot form.

The *Evil Eye*

The *evil eye* is a gaze attack similar to that of a basilisk or a vampire. Each Vistana can invoke it up to three times per day. For those Dungeon Masters who make powers checks for their nonplayer characters, invoking the *evil eye* prompts a 1% chance of attracting the attention of dark powers, modified by any of the situations defined in *Domains of Dread*, Chapter Seven.

The victim is entitled to make a saving throw vs. paralyzation, with success indicating an avoidance of this minor curse. As Van Richten suggests, conditions can modify the roll of the die, as outlined in the table below. Conditions are not cumulative.

Evil Eye Check Modifiers Table

Modifier	Condition
+1	Victim previously made a successful saving throw against an *evil eye* invoked by the same Vistana.
–1	Victim previously failed a saving throw against a power invoked by the same Vistana.
–2	Vistana is female.
–3	Vistana is a seer or *raunie*.
–4 to +4	Victim owns an *evil eye* amulet.

For example, imagine the words of a curse are "Nevermore shall your sword strike true until the Sea of Sorrows is bereft of water." If the recipient of this curse were to give his sword to a friend, but retain the use of it, he might actually get around the curse, but it would not be broken. But he might break the curse by filling a jar of water from the Sea of Sorrows and letting it evaporate. Or he might try writing the word "true" on a piece of paper, then striking it with a sword.

The Evil Eye

A relatively little-known power of the Vistani is their ability to assault an adversary with the *evil eye*. All Vistani are capable of using the *evil eye*, but females are more able, and the seer and *raunie* are by far the most effective casters.

According to Arturi, the process of invoking the *evil eye* is both simple and difficult. It is the former because the Vistana merely looks into the eyes of his adversary and focuses negative emotions on them. It is the latter because summoning anger and hatred on cue is not always easy to do; indeed, those who do so without effort soon become evil creatures themselves, and in the long run are cast out of the tribe. (It is said that the *evil eye* is the only Vistani power left to a darkling.)

The first time one is struck by the *evil eye*, one's senses are assaulted in a

way most people never imagined possible. Quite literally, the amazement which accompanies the force of a Vistana's will is overwhelming, and few have the fortitude to resist its effects. Fortunately, the ability is not overtly magical, so the experience of suffering from it can actually gird one against future assaults. It is, in fact, possible to throw off the *evil eye*'s effects through sheer force of will, especially if the Vistana fails on the first attempt.

Known Effects

There are four known effects of falling under the *evil eye*. The first and most common manifestation is a paralyzing force. The Vistana locks the victim in place like a cobra freezes a bird. Occasionally, the force of the *evil eye* is so powerful that the victim experiences a seizure which he may or may not survive!

The other known applications of the *evil eye* create effects similar to wizard spells, inspiring fear, *charming* the victim, or even planting a hypnotic *suggestion* in his mind. These inducements are not as powerful as their magical counterparts, however. Usually, they do little more than provide the Vistana with a distraction or a few minutes to escape pursuit.

It would also seem that the Vistani have the ability to cast the *evil eye* on animals, objects, monsters—indeed, they can invoke this ability to influence virtually anybody and anything. Such power is fleeting, but they know how to use it strategically, saving it for moments when it serves them best.

The Vistana can invoke any of the following effects with the *evil eye*.

Paralyzation lasts 1d4+1 rounds, during which time the victim is affected as if caught by a *hold* spell. If the saving throw to avoid the attack fails by more than 4, the victim becomes absolutely rigid for 2 rounds, then experiences violent convulsions that last 3 rounds, inflicting 3d8 points of damage in the process. Following the convulsions, the victim must make a System Shock roll. If it fails, the character dies. If successful, the character falls unconscious and is merely "asleep," easily wakened. A *hold* spell prevents the victim from convulsing (and suffering damage), but the System Shock roll is still required.

Fear, *charm*, and *suggestion* operate exactly as do the spells of the same names, except each effect lasts only 1d4+1 rounds.

The *evil eye* can also be used to curse items. The Vistana only need look on an object to force a saving throw vs. disintegration (*Dungeon Master Guide*, Table 29). If the roll fails, all dice-rolling associated with the affected item suffers a –1 penalty for 1d4+1 rounds. Any magical item used during that period simply fails to function on the first try. If the item is charged, one charge is lost in the attempt to use it.

Virtually any object can be cursed by the *evil eye*, but the Dungeon Master must choose the exact effect. For example, the *evil eye* focused on a pursuer's horse might cause it to stumble and fall, a dish of food might be instantly soured, or the strings of a bard's instrument might suddenly snap. In general, the *evil eye* does not inflict damage, although it might be employed to lead to injury, as in the case of the falling horse.

Vision is the art of seeing things invisible.

—Jonathan Swift
"Thoughts on Various Subjects"

CHAPTER FIVE: SALIENT ABILITIES AND VULNERABILITIES

In this chapter, I shall speak of even more remarkable abilities than any I have yet described. In cases where I have not been a personal witness to the phenomena, I have depended on the reliability of my source; the reader must trust my judgment of each witness's character. Better still, do not rely on any anecdote I recount here as gospel. I may have misinterpreted phenomena I have looked on myself. Nevertheless, being a little prepared is better than being unprepared altogether.

Prescient Sight

Who does not know that Vistani tell fortunes? Although their *tarokka* cards and *crystal balls* are well-known tools of prognostication, any number of methods and scrying devices exist to explore the future and past: chiromancy (palm reading), astrology, sortilege (casting of lots), haruspication (inspecting the entrails of animals), oneiromancy (dream interpretation), geomancy (interpretations of random patterns in dust), pyromancy (reading flame), even ornithoscopy (observation of birds' flight patterns). I have seen most media invoked at one time or another through the years, although cartomancy—reading the *tarokka*—is by far the most common method.

I have no doubt that *tarokka* cards are the most prevalent because they are so easily carried. Perhaps equally important, however, is the fact they can be imbued with arcane power. Thus they should be more accurate, and more personal, than most other forms of divination.

I do not believe that any of the physical components themselves are the source of the fortunes told by the Vistani. Whether one tosses bones, counts ripples in a glass of wine, or even spits on a window, the actual power to see is

Fortune-telling

A little research reveals there are dozens of known media for fortune-telling. Cultures around the globe have produced myriad fascinating agents, from the Chinese I Ching to the Native American vision lodge. For a change of venue from the *tarokka* deck, use any of the known types of "-mancy," or possibly invent something unique to your campaign.

For example, a seer might pluck a hair from the head of each hero, then sprinkle these over a pool of water and examine the way they swirl. Or a Vistana might order an adventurer to prick his finger and let a drop of blood fall into a fire so she can listen to the sound and duration of the hiss. Quick-tongued Dungeon Masters can "spontaneously" interpret by drawing together elements of the physical action (the swirling of hairs, the hiss of burning blood) and elements of the fortune to be told.

Since the players themselves know that fortune-telling is only a dramatic plot device, the idea is to make the reading interesting. Pay attention to tone; do not give in to silliness; and remember to roleplay. Other than that, whatever surprises the players is what serves the adventure best.

A deck of *tarokka* cards was last printed with the RAVENLOFT Campaign Setting boxed set (TSR #1108). Instructions on using them appeared in the *Domains and Denizens* booklet therein.

internal. All the rest is merely a matter of custom or convenience; a Vistana who looks into a *crystal ball* everyday could just as easily crush a dead leaf and see the future in the powder of its remains. Personal preference seems to be the deciding factor.

As to the origin of prescience in the Vistani, I think there may be some magic involved, but the fact of the matter is that *giorgios* do not understand the nature of time. To most of us, it is a linear, inescapable progression of collective reality. We believe the present moment is the same fleeting segment no matter where one goes in the universe, and we all vehemently insist that we live nowhere else. But the observable Vistani attitude toward time is not the same, and neither is their grasp of it. An esteemed colleague of mine who knows as much of the Vistani as any *giorgio*, a sage-philosopher of Mortigny named Andrianna Cardarelle, responded to this issue in a recent letter:

"Time is purely an arbitrary invention of the mind, providing us with a means to express relationships between memories, experiences, and dreams. The first we call the past, the second the present, and the third the future. All of them are merely perceptions that register in the mind and are recorded, and none is less real than any other. Thus we "look" backward and forward much as we look at the present.

"The Vistani simply possess a slightly more sophisticated perspective of this vision than the rest of us. Even though past, present, and future all exist in the mind, most non-Vistani cannot freely move between the three, mentally or otherwise. The Vistani, however, can."

I know not if this faculty is inborn or learned. If the latter is the case, then all Vistani should have the power to look ahead and back in time. If the former is true, then perhaps some have the sight and others do not. Personally, I believe the ability to tell fortunes is inborn, simply because it appears that only females can become seers. This gender-relatedness indicates that there is some heritable trait that causes, or perhaps allows, prescient vision.

The Tribal Seer

Indeed, when I asked Arturi if men could read fortunes, he vehemently replied in the negative. "Only a giver of Life may look on the future and past of others without inviting destruction," he explained. "Death stalks those who see through time, seeking to preserve the secrets of the past and future, but Death cannot touch a woman." He went on to explain that all Vistani females are capable of fortune-telling.

There is almost always a tribal seer in every caravan of each *tasque*. Normally it is the eldest female in the group, but one Vatraska caravan I met had a seer who was quite a bit younger than other women in the family, and I have heard reports of similar circumstances elsewhere. In any event, the tribal seer's powers of augury are the most potent, and she is often capable of entering a trancelike state to perform readings, to locate a person or thing, or to act as a medium for spirits. She is equal in status to the *raunie*, though not equal in authority. Rather, she is like a queen's prized counselor, except she is royal herself.

The Legend of the Dukkar

Only partially satisfied with Arturi's explanation of why females alone can tell fortunes, I asked why it might not be remotely possible for a male to be born with the sight—say, once in a century. The idea distressed him, and I asked why.

"The gift of sight is detected in babies by both the *raunie* and the seer," he explained, "and such a male would be immediately put to death, even in a caravan where birth is rare, even though the Vistani cherish their children to a depth no *giorgio* could ever understand."

"But that makes no sense," I said.

"This boy you refer to would grow up to be the *Dukkar*—the one who is hunted by Death—and only by becoming evil could he escape Death.

The *Dukkar*

Van Richten's reference to the "Great Upheaval of 740" is, of course, the Grand Conjunction (see Chapter One of *Domains of Dread*). Hyskosa was a prescient male Vistana (a *Dukkar*) who appeared in *From the Shadows* (TSR #9375). The Vistani are paranoid about the possibility of a *Dukkar* wandering the domains, since he is a "blind spot" in their amazing vision. Therefore, they are never sure if a *Dukkar* has been born or if fear is creating a specter in their imaginations. After Hyskosa, the next Dukkar became the cambion fiend Malocchio Aderre (see the previous section, "Demons," Chapter Five, for details).

If adventurers seek out the services of Vistani, and the Dungeon Master does not have a particular task for them to perform in payment, they can always be asked to investigate the possible existence of a *Dukkar*. This goal can be an excuse to send them to the next phase of their quest, or it might become a side adventure, but the *Dukkar* himself never appears. At best, the heroes might recover evidence that a *Dukkar* exists.

The Evil Eye (TSR #9497), an adventure module about the Vistani, centers on the emergence of a *Dukkar* (Malocchio Aderre). Dungeon Masters looking for an excellent example of a *Dukkar*, as well as how the Vistani deal with him, should consult that adventure.

Therefore, he would be killed before that opportunity arose."

The legend of the *Dukkar* appears in the *doroq* of many tribes. The tale has several forms, but in essence, it tells of a boy who is born with powers of sight, unbeknownst to the Vistani (or outside their jurisdiction, or to a darkling, depending on the teller). Alarmingly, they cannot discover who or where he is until too late, in spite of their most powerful magic and clearest sight. This abomination accrues a variety of nefarious powers in addition to prescience, then embarks on an astounding array of atrocities for which both gods and *giorgios* blame the Vistani. In the end, the entire Vistani nation is wiped from the face of the land, in various and terrible ways.

The Vistani insist a *Dukkar* has recently walked the domains of our world, and he caused the Great Upheaval of 740, which reshaped our land. Hyskosa, they name him, with a curse and a ward against the *evil eye*. They say Death found and took Hyskosa, but not before he caused great evil. They also claim that he will be back. This prediction seems the greatest, perhaps the only, fear in any Vistani heart.

Furthermore, Arturi whispered to me that a new *Dukkar* has arisen on our world, and that Dukkar's name is none other than Malocchio Aderre of Invidia! I have made myself a promise to further investigate this at a future time.

A Key Weakness

Curiously, for all their ability to look into the past and future, the Vistani are apparently incapable of self-evaluation through the medium of prescience. Certainly they can look ahead and behind and see themselves there, but for some reason they cannot focus on those moments in time with the same clarity as they can when reading for others. A less sophisticated mind might speculate that the gods impose this restriction to deprive the Vistani of the power to control their own destiny.

I rather suspect that, as is the case for so many of us, what seems a simple operation when performed on others becomes impossible when we attempt it on ourselves. For example, many people who give wonderful advice are incapable of following it themselves, and there is a well-known adage which proclaims that a doctor who treats himself has a fool for a patient. It is human nature to remain totally blind to ourselves, even when we see others with crystalline clarity.

For the very same reason we seldom can examine ourselves with clear

objectivity, I submit that the Vistani cannot perform any but the most rudimentary auguries for their own information. This is why they so often demand services of *giorgios* who request their help. This is why they cannot control the ebb and flow of time for their own profit. Above all, this weakness may well reflect their refusal to substantially affect time, even if they have the power to do so—since they cannot clearly read the effect of changing history on their own fate, there is no way they will risk disaster by using the powers they possess.

Mist Navigation

I learned the Vistani were not common creatures on the day the Corvara took my son and fled Rivalis all those years ago. I left town on a fast horse that morning, barely an hour behind them, and rode as hard as I could without killing my mount, yet still I had not caught them by the time the sun went down. That night, I learned they had escaped through fog and mist, and had been beyond my reach almost from the start. My proof of this truth came when I was myself escorted by a Vistana using *mist navigation*. We traveled from the western border of Darkon to the northern border of Barovia in only a few minutes, despite the fact that hundreds of miles lie between those domains as the raven flies! Had I not done so, I would never have caught up with the Radanavich caravan, I would never have had that fateful confrontation with Firdusa Radanavich, and I would have had a very different life.

The power to travel through fog and mist cannot be explained, even by the Vistani. When I asked, "How is it done?" they answered, "How does one fall asleep? How does one wake up? One simply does." Friendlier tribes, like the

Mist Navigation

In the RAVENLOFT world, *mist navigation* is a means of moving characters across large expanses in a matter of minutes or less—and it is the purview of the Dungeon Master alone. *Mist navigation* is, in game terms, a form of extradimensional travel and time travel, but Vistani can do so at will and without limitation. Creating rules that explain *mist navigation* can only restrict a Dungeon Master's ability to employ them when needed, so none are described here.

However, this travel can be a frightening setting for adventure. Once the fog has swallowed the party, strange noises, thumps that slowly come closer and closer, flitting shadows in the gray twilight, and other lurking dangers can drive heroes to distraction. Remember that not all threats are real, and true danger leaps out of the shadows when the heroes think they have avoided it.

There are always mist horrors out there (see the first *RAVENLOFT MONSTROUS COMPENDIUM Appendix*), but any monster appropriate to the RAVENLOFT setting can stalk the misty realms. In fact, even creatures inappropriate to a classic horror setting might appear, lending a tone of surrealism to the adventure.

Play games with the adventurers as they travel along. Tell them that they turn around and find the Vistani who were taking them through are gone. Reduce their movement rates to MV 3 as soon as they hear a pack of deranged wolves approaching, then treat all characters—player and nonplayer characters alike—as if they have been double-*hasted* the moment battle begins. (Everyone quadruples movement and attacks; roll initiative normally.) Reverse the order of initiative after it has been established, either arbitrarily or with the roll of a die. (This drives some players nuts!) Announce that the party seems to be affected by the reverse of *comprehend languages*, just as a group of monsters moves in to attack—make everyone write down all intended actions for each melee round, and allow no table talk between players. In short, do anything that creates a nightmarish feel.

Kamii, went so far as to explain that a *raunie* wills a fog to rise, and her captain directs the caravan through the blind fog—but on the particulars of how these feats are accomplished, they would not comment.

While a traveler is using *mist navigation*, time and space grow immeasurable, and time perhaps even reverses or advances at a great rate. A trip from Ludendorf in northwestern Lamordia to Arbora in southwestern Nova Vaasa does not necessarily require any more time than an excursion from one side of Forlorn to the other; it is impossible to say which journey lasted longer. I am not implying that both trips become equal in time and distance; I am saying that it is impossible to perceive the difference between them. Eternity and an instant are indistinguishable. The journey does not seem, subjectively, to be very long; little or no time at all passes in the world outside this blanket of blindness.

Unfortunately, the only occurrence that can render time meaningful during *mist navigation* is the appearance of a hostile creature. That misfortune, I am sorry to say, can make a trip seem interminable. It is possible, the Vistani report, to encounter lost monsters in the vapors, creatures made of malevolent fog, madmen too wild and violent to explain how they got there, and horrors unknown. Sometimes the Vistani can control or repel these threats, and sometimes they cannot.

Tracking Magic

Probably because of their kinship with nature, the Vistani are excellent trackers. Certainly the powers of a seer can enhance the ability to find people—and objects as well—but the Vistani also possess a few arcane means to achieve those ends. For example, a few farmers know that a forked stick can be held in both hands and employed to discover the underground presence of water, but a Vistana might use a divining rod to track a man as well. All he needs is a personal possession of his quarry to be found, which he affixes to the pointing end of the stick. Then the Vistana holds the forked arms and lets the stick subtly tug him in the direction of his man.

If the target of the search is farther away, and nothing is available with which to "bait" the rod, the seer sometimes produces a small silver pin and delicately places it in a bowl of water such that it actually rests on the surface of the liquid. She then places her hands on each side of the bowl and concentrates on the person or object she seeks. Slowly, the pin floats to the center of the bowl, swings about, and points in the direction in which the target lies. Then the seer begins to count aloud, and when she hits upon the number of miles between her and the target, the pin sinks. Obviously, this method of tracking requires absolute stillness on the part of the seer and those around her, but it is remarkably accurate, and apparently unlimited in its range as well.

Vistani naturally possess the Tracking proficiency in the same manner as rangers, similarly improving with experience levels (or Hit Dice). As *mist navigation* allows them to travel unlimited distances, their tracking magic fMollows the same extradimensional pathways and therefore has unlimited range. If the Vistani want to find someone, they will. Conversely, if they know a party of adventurers is following them, they can easily track its progress and disappear in moments.

Spells and items that protect against detection and location also prevent the Vistani from locating a hero, although they might concentrate on his horse or companions to achieve the same result.

Slowing the Prey

The speed of a Vistani caravan is not great. When there is need to overtake faster prey, or perhaps to outdistance faster hunters, the *raunie* threads a

needle, then pricks her finger, squeezing a drop of her blood onto the point. She then ties the thread to the back of her *vardo* and allows the needle to drag in the dirt behind. Somehow, this slows or hinders the person or persons whom she hopes to evade or catch.

Whether or not the heroes know they are being tracked by Vistani, the Dungeon Master can subtly or overtly impede their progress. For example, after they are reassured that the next village is three hours' ride ahead, tell them it took four hours to reach the destination, but do not explain where they lost the hour. In combat, slow their movement rates by 3, and tell them to add +3 to their initiative rolls; again, do not explain. Both *protection from evil* and its reverse defend a character from this power.

Vista-chiri and Other Minions

Like druids, Vistani have an affinity for the wild animals of the forest. Natural creatures tend to gravitate toward them and follow them as they travel. The Vistani seem to pay these companions

little heed, but Arturi assured me that animal movements are a part of the tapestry of life: When an animal alters its daily habits or disappears, the tribes notice the change immediately, just as a weaver would see a tangle or hole appearing in her fabric. Hence, every creature of the forest is a sentry on the perimeter of the caravan.

In particular, the tiny gray and white birds called *vista-chiri,* which flitter almost invisibly through the treetops, are effective spies. I have seen them swoop down to light on the fingers of

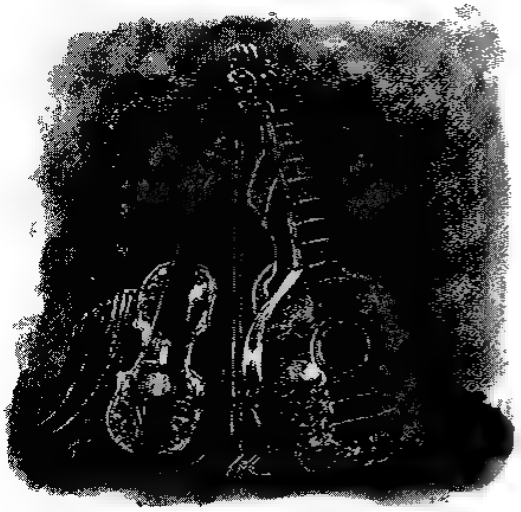
Vista-chiri

An adventurer who actively searches the trees for *vista-chiri* has a 40% chance to spot them if present; rangers and druids enjoy a +10% bonus to the roll, +20% if they have the Animal Lore proficiency and make a successful check. Heroes can roll to spot the birds once per turn of active searching, which slows a character's movement rate by 3. Of course, the birds' presence does not guarantee the proximity of a Vistani troupe.

Vista-chiri and other creatures in the vicinity of a caravan make it nearly impossible to surprise the Vistani. Adventurers have a –6 penalty to do so. Only by casting *commune with nature* can a druid (and only a druid) pass undetected into the Vistani's midst, requiring a normal successful surprise roll.

As Van Richten suggests, a *raunie* can communicate with *vista-chiri* as if she had cast *speak with animals.* The ability is natural, requires no casting time, and does not have a limited duration. The little bird can tell the *raunie* how many intruders there are and whether they have the "smell" of hostility on them, as well as their direction and distance.

Strangers are spotted a quarter mile from the caravan, about a five-minute walk on clear, level ground. The birds need one round to reach the Vistani, plus 1d4 more rounds to locate and communicate with the *raunie.* Whether the Vistani have time to further identify the outsiders through their seer's powers depends on how fast the strangers are moving in comparison to the birds.



Vistani, and I am told a *raunie* can understand their language. If one is searching for the Vistani, *vista-chiri* in the branches overhead are the first indication that the Vistani are close. Of course, by that time the Vistani have probably been notified of the seeker by the birds.

Powers over Monsters

This land of ours has often been unkind to us. We lock our doors by night and hope nothing comes through the window; we avoid strangers who seem overly friendly; we seek the protection of each other's company when the lights go out; and at times we step boldly forth to confront evil, armed with the silver sword and the holy symbol. Yet this is not the way of the Vistani.

One of the most amazing things about these people is the fact that they live out of doors in spite of the obvious dangers. How is it that they are not torn to shreds by werebeasts, or drained of life by ghosts, or turned into monsters themselves by a vampire? They cannot ward their doors against the encroachment of evil, for most have no door to close, let alone lock!

Certainly they have their magical wards against unintelligent creatures—zombies, malevolent plants, and the like. They even have their own version of holy symbols, although these are natural rather than endowed with divine potency. But there is something more, something that I cannot pinpoint and that they will not verify. I almost hesitate to say what I believe to be the fact of the matter, for my hypothesis is staggering.

I believe that evil itself fears the Vistani! How do I come to this conclusion? By falling upon the chief maxim of inductive reasoning, put forth by my old friend Alanik Ray: When all other explanations have been ruled out, whatever conclusion remains—however absurd—cannot help but be the truth. The evidence which leads me to my "absurd" belief is as follows:

- They exhibit powers over time and space which no other creature, living or dead, can perform. For example, natural fog and mists seem to obey them: coming when called, leaving when bidden, carrying them by some means to any place they choose. The Vistani merely command it.
- Witness also their prescient sight, and how some of them can even move from one point in time to another with little or no conscious effort. Is this an ability which can be artificially reproduced, even by a lich? What manner of beings are they, really? Sadly, the Vistani will not say.
- The *evil eye* is known and feared even by the most diabolical monsters I have ever met and battled. Witness the following journal entry, taken from the diary of a nosferatu of Forlorn, a creature that I destroyed years ago.

'Twas a pack of goblyns what flushed the vagabonds from their fire, throwing rocks from the bowers and naming foul names upon them. I were drawn by their sweet human blood, and were only spying from the shadows—I knew better than to cross them, I did.

Suddenly the vagabonds were rushing through the undergrowth, scattering the gruesome beasties who worship the ghost of Castle Tristenoira as if they were rabbits in the bushes. Then, one of them came upon me in my hiding spot. Before I could flee, she fixed

me solid with her eye, locking me in my place with no more than a look.

In a fright, I snarled at her. That would have put any normal human into a dead run in the opposite direction, but she laughed and turned her back on me. The paralysis left me, but I dared not strike her. My life is misery enough without a curse to dog my steps as well!

—From the private journal of Nilan McCoumbe

McCoumbe's remarks indicate that not only he, a reasonably intelligent being, was afraid of the Vistani, but so were the thick-skull goblyns of Forlorn, which are creatures renowned for their insensitivity to danger. The Vistani, on the other hand, feared neither monster, and apparently had no reason to do so.

So, the Vistani control time and space, and they are not afraid of evil that walks the night. If this is not sufficient reason to wonder at their true nature, then consider the following fact: The Vistani are respected by even the most powerful rulers! Lord Azalin hates them, I know from his own words, yet they come and go through Darkon in spite of his wrath, apparently eluding his horrifying border patrols of blood-sucking golems (called blood hunters) and the dreaded Kargat. Strahd von Zarovich welcomes them in his lands, especially the Zarovan, and it is said that he has actually divulged secrets regarding his domain to Madame Eva, their *raunie*. In land after land, the Vistani conduct their affairs virtually unmolested by the lord's authorities, if any exist.

Make no mistake, you who read these words: Those who rule these domains are powerful men and women, and many are noted for their brutality. Perhaps tyranny is the only way to govern an evil land—what evil fears must also horrify the good, so that all labor under a yoke of terror. Whatever reason, those across the domains who assume the mantle of power almost uniformly wield a scepter of fear.

Yet they do not harass the Vistani.

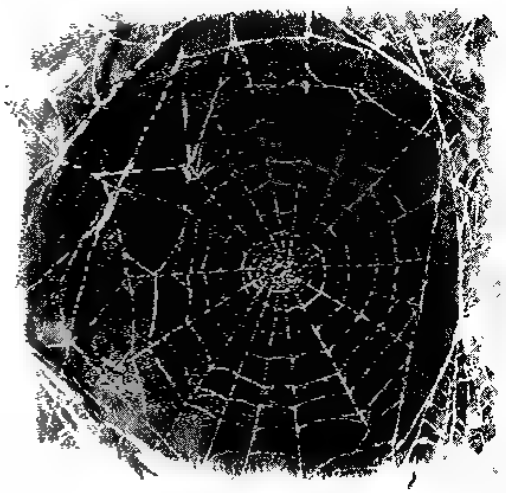
This forbearance seems incredible. It forces me to a leap of logic perhaps no reader will follow: Could the Vistani be the true rulers of this Land of ours? Mad you might call me, but tot up the evidence for yourself. If it is true, it is ironic in the extreme that they are abused so by the common *giorgio*. Those who have the most to fear in the misty domains wax impudent where powerful lords hesitate to offend.

Static Burn

Considering my long enmity with the Vistani, it would be natural to assume I have had no relationship with them whatsoever. In fact, I have associated with a few persons of Vistani blood over the years. I even established a prolonged correspondence with a *mortu* Vistana named Cyrilla Deschamps, who aided me in terminating a particularly cunning werewolf while she was still of the blood. Our common enemy thrust us together only temporarily, and we quickly parted company when the beast had been dispatched, for each of us felt an acute sense of distaste in the other's presence.

Cyrilla contracted lycanthropy during our mutual foray. Fortunately, the monster we slew was the progenitor of its line. She sought out an abjurist priest, who removed the taint of lycanthropy from her without incident.

Nevertheless, she was ostracized by her tribe, condemned by the *karash*,



even after she had been cured! By Vistani law, her blood had been tainted, automatically eliminating her from the family tree like a pruned branch.

I was the only *giorgio* Cyrilla knew at all, so she came to me. I situated her with Mrs. Maurina, a funny old neighbor of mine in Mordentshire, who had enough room in her home, and enough charity in her heart, to help someone start a new life.

Shortly after, Cyrilla grew ill. I implored the Vistana to allow me to treat her fever, but she would not tolerate it. She insisted that she only wanted to rest, and sent me away. A few days later, I visited Cyrilla, and sure enough her fever had broken. But there was something different about her, a certain helplessness that had never existed before. Cyrilla was never quite the same person again.

Herein lies the only real weakness of the Vistani, as I have pointed it out: By ceasing to be nomadic, they cease to be Vistani. When they are land-bound, either by force or by choice, they lose their formidable native powers and become *mortu*, comparatively powerless humans.

No Vistana expresses the slightest yearning for a place to call home. In fact, Vistani actually fall sick when they stay too long in one place. They exhibit flulike symptoms and break out in a rash that reddens them from head to toe. Lying down does not help—to the contrary, walking about eventually makes them feel better (which should come as no surprise)—yet they grow listless and ever more sedentary. A fever rages in their heads, and when it finally breaks, they are no longer Vistani. The *tasques* have no name for this illness, as if they would deny its very existence, but I call this condition static burn.

As my anecdote above demonstrates, performing a medical examination is out of the question—a perceived frontal assault on Vistani privacy—so I am unable to determine the physical mechanism of this condition. However, based on my observations as a doctor, I suspect that there is some latent virus in the Vistani body, which lies dormant as long as they remain active. However, if they fail to generate sufficient body heat, or fail to take in enough oxygen, or fail some other biological function directly related to nomadism, the virus grows. In turn, a dangerous fever inhabits the brain, destroying those parts of it which engender all salient and almost all common powers. Of course, the process could be entirely magical as well, although no mage I have consulted could explain it as such.

All that remains certain is the Vistana—no, the *mortu*—becomes a radically changed person. He must either think like a *giorgio* or go mad, so he loses his unique perspectives on time and space, even his peculiar affinity with the moon. Bitterness often claims him. He becomes a nervous, suspicious creature, demanding solitude on a regular basis.

Some *mortu* grow restless and take to the road, becoming adventurers, secretly hoping that their former selves will return. They do not make friends easily, but they are ruthlessly efficient in combat, and therefore people I would prefer to have on my side.

Static Burn

A Vistana begins to experience static burn after remaining within 1 mile of any point for longer than a week. Exercise or "walking laps" in the area has no effect on this. Regardless of the Vistana's activities, he falls ill on the eighth day, and 1d6+1 days later, his Vistani powers disappear forever. He becomes *mortu* (see the DUNGEON MASTER Appendix for this section).

When Vistani are arrested or otherwise captured, they quickly tell their captors they "will die" if they are imprisoned. They do not explain what they mean, but threaten to curse their jailers if they "die." If adventurers are involved in detaining the Vistana, a 1% powers check is in order. If they know about static burn and capture a Vistana, the check is 7%, as this action amounts to torturing a neutral nonplayer character.

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But, ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light.

—Edna St. Vincent Millay
"A Few Figs from Thistles"

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

curiously commingled joy and despair filled my breast when I had finally concluded my observations of the Vistani—joy at the realization that those I had dreaded as my longtime enemies had never really been enemies at all, and despair for all the wasted decades—yes, decades—of bitter anger and resentment.

I have paid an extraordinary price for my hatred, paid for it with the lives of my friends and loved ones. I might have settled the debt at any time these many years, yet I chose to go on hating, resolved to continue feeding the infernal fires of my curse. What a damned fool I have been!

Yes, the Vistani are an alien and potentially dangerous people, but they are not a menace unless one makes himself the same to them. I now believe that I brought dire misfortune on myself, that I embraced my curse rather than pushed it away, and that there is blood on my hands because I dipped them into it with the malice of forethought. Any responsibility the Vistani bore for what I became ended on the day that I decided to chase ghosts in the mists instead of specters in my own past.

The Last Steps

I informed Arturi I had concluded my studies, and he must consider my curse on his tribe null and void, for there was little left to forgive. "I know not if there is a ritual for such things," I told him, "but I will gladly do whatever you ask of me, even if it means forfeiting my life."

"Then arm yourself for a battle to the death," he replied, drawing a knife from his boot.

I had no intention of resisting his attack. I stood, my arms extended, hands loosely curled, prepared to receive his judgment. He seized my left wrist and shook my hand until the fingers opened. The judgment of the *vishnadd*, I thought. I resolved to receive stoically the pull of his blade across my palm. But he exposed his own palm and opened it as well.

The blood rite! With a sound clap our hands clasped, mine swinging to meet his on impulse. My mind reeled with the sanctity of this gift, and the uncertainty as to what I should do, say, or feel. Arturi sheathed his knife, pulled a pure white scarf from his pocket, and wrapped our bleeding members tightly. A throbbing pulse reached a crescendo in my veins as our crimson essences mingled, pounding in my head, palpitating through my body, until it seemed that my blood must spray like a geyser from the wound! Yet the scarf remained unstained.

Arturi's expression suggested he, too, was affected, yet we exchanged no word. Instead, we stared intently into one another's eyes while our hearts beat in unison, and we realized that our separate agonies had made us spiritual twins. Our eyes brimmed and spilled over in sympathy, yet we smiled and nodded together.

A single drop of our fused blood fell between us. It hissed as it struck the dirt, like cold water on a hot griddle, and a dense mist billowed up. Still we clung to one another, almost oblivious, until we were lost in a blind fog. It swirled around us like a mob of

voiceless ghosts, blotting out the surrounding landscape, isolating us in a timeless netherworld.

I know not how long we remained there, for that which I call "time" lost all meaning. I was transfixed, enraptured. For one brief and eternal moment I glimpsed the raw nature of time itself—I was a Vistana, with power to see the past and future as clearly as the present. I comprehended that no distance exists between places or events, that all things lie directly before those who know how to see them. My mind opened like an overripe bud, transporting me into a multiverse of possibilities. I became infinitesimal and infinite at the same time! My description is esoteric in the extreme, yet I must insist it was as real to me as I am to you.

Suddenly, I was back in my own "*giorgio*" state of time, for it dawned on me that some interval had passed. I inhaled deeply and stretched my eyelids wide, glancing around me as my wits returned. Slowly the mists thinned and blew away. Arturi unwrapped the scarf that bound us together and let go of my hand. I looked at my palm, smeared with red, and marveled, for the cut of the knife was healed, leaving only a bright purple scar.

When the mists had completely dissipated, I surveyed the scene. To the west, the sun burned orange on the horizon, giving up its luster to the spreading cloak of dusk. To the east, the smooth, windward face of a ragged-peaked range of mountains gleamed crimson in the last vestiges of daylight.

I turned to look behind me, and a thrill of fear washed through my body. The two of us now stood in a small, wooded hollow, among the broken remains of an old Vistani caravan. Three *vardos* listed over rotted axles, their rounded roofs having fallen in long ago. Once-bright coats of red and yellow paint sloughed off the spongy wood below. Stained-glass windows lay in tiny shards on the ground, or clung hopelessly to weather-worn sills, caked with filth.

"Do you remember this place?" asked Arturi.

I nodded. "We're in Barovia. This is your family's encampment, where it all began."

"Where it all began," echoed the outcast. "And where it now will end." Solemnly he asked, "Rudolph Van Richten, do you forgive my people the wrongs they have done you?" His face held both terror and apprehension.

"With all my heart!" I cried. "And am I forgiven for my crimes against the Corvara and the Radanavich family?"

"Beyond all question!"

We shook hands, then embraced, and for all the world I felt a cloud on my soul lift and dissipate. "Is it done, Arturi? Is it over?"

"There remains one last thing to do."

"What? What do we do?"

Arturi gazed at the old encampment, as if he could see it years ago—a merry fire and a raven-haired girl gamboling to a spirited violin; a throng of Radanaviches clapping and singing, unmindful of approaching doom.

"Burn it," he finally said. "Burn it to ashes."

Briefly, Arturi cocked his head and closed his eyes. "The dead are coming," he said. "We must hold them off until we are done."

The woods rustled with approaching footsteps. Though the curse was all but over, still dark was swiftly falling, and we two stood unprotected by walls or locks. It did not occur to me then to question my companion's continuing

susceptibility, when I knew in my bones the shadow was lifted.

Quickly Arturi struck a spark while I gathered dry scrub to pack beneath the *vardos*' frames. A zombie broke free of the forest and strode toward Arturi, but I intercepted and crushed it to the ground with a heavy stick. The Vistana puffed at a nest of brittle leaves and yellow grass, until it burst into flame. Another corpse shuffled into view; I struck it down, to find yet another on its heels. On a slat of oak bark, Arturi lifted his tiny fire to the wagons, and touched it to the brush. The scrub readily ignited. Soon, the *vardos* blazed fiercely, and inky plumes of soot streaked the evening sky.

Throughout the night we held our ground with raging flames behind us, desperately fending off zombies, ghouls, unliving animals of all breeds, and even a ghost. Time dissolved into an endless stream of rotted assailants which piled at our feet as we struck them down. Sparks drifted over and caught on the desiccated flesh, augmenting the bonfire and helping to shield our flanks, but surrounding us with blistering fire. I thought surely we would be immolated ourselves. I know not whence came my strength to keep fighting, yet it was there, beyond reason and hope.

"Go back!" I shouted as dawn reached over the Balinok Mountains and began to push away the darkness. "There is nothing here for you anymore! Go back!"

To my astonishment, the undead abruptly halted their advance, turned, and shuffled back to the cover of the deep forest beyond! Had I had that power all the long night? Did I at last turn back the undead I had summoned so long ago? My mind was too numb to contemplate the possibility.

Arturi and I collapsed to the ground in exhaustion and lay there, silent but for our gasping breath. Behind us, the *vardos* fell into gray, smoldering ashes. Somewhere nearby, a mourning dove began to coo heartily, encouraging the rising sun, filling my spirit with such lightness that I thought I, too, could take wing. Arturi's eyes and mine met, and we both began to laugh like children on

a midsummer's romp. We roared until the woods filled with our glee.

At last a contemplative silence came over us, and I think we both dozed in the warm morning sun. At length we arose and ate a bit of jerked beef which I carried in my pack, along with some wild raspberries from the nearby brush and cold, fresh water from a stream that flowed to us out of the mountains. No thoughts of hunting the dead entered my mind, and no concerns for further investigation tainted my reverie. For the first time since I could remember, I felt content to simply be.

"I shall go home to Mordentshire, write up my notes on the Vistani, and take a long vacation," I said to my dear friend. "Perhaps the time has come to return to Rivalis, my true home town."

"If that is your wish," said Arturi, strangely melancholy. "I wish you well and all peace."

"And you may return to the Corvara!"

"No. I will never go back."

"What! Why not?"

Arturi's eyes saddened once more and he shook his head slowly. "I am no longer Corvara. I am not even sure that I am Vistana anymore. It has been too long, and too much has passed." He looked at me and asked, "Is it not the same with you?"

"I—" A desperate desire arose in me to convince him that we could both leave our pasts behind, yet I knew

immediately that he was right. "Then you must come home with me, Arturi," I said at last. "We shall concoct and sell herbal remedies as partners and friends. We shall live as carefree bachelors. We shall forge a new future for ourselves to replace the past."

The Vistana smiled softly. "By now you should know that the past does not lie behind us. It is part of what we are, part of what we will always be. I am the Outcast, and it is my fate to wander this world."

"Come now, Arturi! Our curse is broken. Is there nothing good that can come of that?"

"We are what we are, and that is not such a bad thing, is it?" He stood up and dusted himself off. "This land is filled with evil, yet there is much goodness in it, and it is beautiful. I do not think that I would care to settle down, even though the dead have stopped chasing me. Perhaps I am still Vistana after all."

"As true a Vistana as there ever was!" I assured him, rising to my own feet and clapping him on the back. "Proud and defiant, clear-eyed and wise."

"Goodbye, Rudolph Van Richten, *giogoto* and my friend."

"Goodbye, Arturi Radanavich."

With that, I turned to the north, seeking the old Svalich Road and the way to Mordentshire, and Arturi turned to the south. I have not seen him since that day.

A Final Farewell

My notes for this *Guide to the Vistani* are now transcribed and committed to a local scribe, who will make several copies for me and my scholarly associates. I cannot say that this is my finest work, but it is certainly the most important, for in its conclusion I find that I may finally put down my pen and let it rest.

There remains so much evil across the domains, so much work for men and women of a heroic bent to complete. I wish I could say with the slightest conviction that I have made a difference with my work and publications, but only time—whatever that is—will tell. However history judges me, I think my part in its making is done. Surely there might be further adventures for me, as nothing remains forever buried in the past here in our world, yet I am certain that my role as a leader of the crusade is finished. And, I must hasten to add, I am grateful for that!

Sometimes the temptation to again take up the mallet and stake inflames my spirit, bids me to rise with the full moon and ride into the night—the old trumpet of glory still calls to me. Yet I must resist. There is only so much that one man can accomplish, and I dare say I have done more than most.

Tonight, I shall sit by the fire until it winks out, with a snifter in one hand and a novel in the other. Then I shall retire to my bed and sleep in peace. I hope to dream of my beloved Ingrid and Erasmus, and of all the wonderful friends I have known throughout the years. In the morning I will rise and open my door to admit sweet breezes and sunshine. I will sit by my window and drink tea, and perhaps welcome a friend or two. And I hope, gentle reader, that you will do the same.

—Dr. Rudolph Van Richten
Mordentshire, Mordent
King's Calendar 742

Glossary of Vistani Terms

Blood rite: A mingling of blood, spiritually joining two people. A giorgio invited to complete the blood rite becomes a giogoto when the ritual is over.

Bourdad: A dry, red berry wine, imbibed on solemn occasions. (The Vistani do not often drink intoxicating beverages.)

Braxat: A common Vistani poison that slowly immolates its imbiber.

Captain: The male leader of a caravan.

Doroq: The ritualistic telling of legends and stories around the campfire.

Dukkar, The: A Vistani abomination in the form of a male seer, who is prophesied to bring doom on all Vistani *tasques*.

Dya-yahg: The command to break camp, loosely meaning "leave the fire."

Endari-vitir: A Vistani farewell, literally meaning "all paths converge."

Etherol: A common Vistani poison that slowly traps the imbiber in an ethereal state.

Fulltide: The three days during which the moon is full.

Giogoto: A person who is not a member of a Vistani tribe, but who is considered a friend or ally of that tribe (including other Vistani as well as *giorgios*).

Giorgio: A non-Vistani person.

Karash: A state of banishment from the tribe. The *karash* is brought on Vistani who have offended their caravan or tribal laws, but are not cursed in the process. It is not as dire as *shalach-ti*.

Kir-yahg: The command to set up camp, literally meaning "make fire."

Koorah: An exclamation of agreement, literally meaning "utterly true."

Lunadi: A Vistani way of saying "it shall be done," literally meaning "by the moon." The Vistani often say "*lunadi*" instead of "okay."

Lunaset: A ritual that begins at midnight on the third and last night of the full moon. All Vistani leave the circle of their campfire and perform secret rituals until dawn.

Mishamel: A dreadful Vistani curse that causes the victim to slowly melt into a pool of viscous liquid.

Mortu: One who is no longer considered a Vistana. A person who willfully leaves a tribe is considered *mortu*. Usually, the Vistana loses all special native powers.

Paatern: A very subtle, prearranged signal between two Vistani.

Patterna: The Vistani dialect, made of words borrowed from many languages.

Porda: A natural curative that either heals or nauseates the imbiber.

Prastona: A Vistani girl who dances the *prastonata*.

Prastonata: The traditional evening dance around the campfire.

Raunie: The female leader of a caravan.

Shalach-ti: A state of banishment from the tribe, usually for some heinous crime. The offending Vistana is ritually, and permanently, cast into the darkness.

Tasque: A nation of Vistani, which is made of several tribes, which are in turn divided into caravans or families.

Tralaks: Written symbols conveying messages to fellow tribal caravans.

Vardo: A round-topped, horse-drawn wagon used by the Vistani.

Vishnadd: Justice. Literally meaning "dark blade," the *vishnadd* is an obsidian knife that is a central fixture in the Vistani system of justice. The word is sometimes uttered when vengeance has been exacted.

Vistana: The singular form of Vistani.

Zsalev: A quasi-magical, intangible essence that hunts a victim, then hovers nearby, radiating a *fear* effect.

Many AD&D game players have expressed an interest in roleplaying Vistani heroes. Responding to this proposition has been difficult for two reasons. First, there has been, until the release of this supplement, little or no cultural information on which to base the class. While the Gypsy stereotype of the movies is easy enough to imitate, most of the Vistani mystique has been intentionally undefined to keep the race strange and frightening. Second, many existing Vistani powers (previous to the release of this supplement) must remain outside the players' purview. To allow an adventurer to read fortunes could only cause headaches for the Dungeon Master, and no player character should ever use *mist navigation*!

Nevertheless, the interest in Vistani heroes is genuine, and it may be that these people have been left in the shadows too long. Now the RAVENLOFT campaign's nomads can be as three-dimensional as any of the good doctor's past subjects of study. Based on the information presented in the previous pages, it should be relatively easy to roleplay one of these characters. In spite of their wondrous powers, the Vistani are human beings, so allowing a player to run one of them is only a matter of limiting their "native abilities" to an extent that retains the flavor of the race, but does not unbalance the game—this appendix aims to accomplish that goal.

Domains of Dread introduced the half-Vistani as a race, rather than as a kit as presented here, and also produced the gypsy, a rogue subclass. That race and subclass are based on the original kit, described here, which can be used to generate *mortu* Vistani heroes.

Vistani Character Background

No hero can be a full-blooded Vistani, living in a caravan with a family. He might either possess mixed Vistani parentage, or he might be *mortu*, a full-blooded Vistana who has abandoned the tribe and settled down long enough for static burn to have come and gone. The choice is the player's, although a Dungeon Master rules whether either type can exist in his individual campaign. Optionally, the hero might be a wayfarer from some other campaign setting who has been mysteriously endowed with some Vistani traits. The Rhennee from the GREYHAWK campaign are similar in some ways to the Vistani, and the Dungeon Master is free to rule that an actual connection exists between these peoples and possibly other Gypsylike folk in other AD&D campaigns.

Whatever the Vistani kit, roleplaying is emphasized over game mechanics. A player who cannot or will not play the part detracts from the mystique of the Vistani, and should therefore choose another character.

If a player wishes to generate a character who is related to a specific tribe, he should normally be allowed to do so. However, the Dungeon Master may choose to employ a percentile roll to determine the tribal affiliation of a Vistani hero:

Vistani Tribes for Heroes

1d100	Tribe
01–40	Kamii
41–60	Equaar
61–80	Vatraska
81–90	Naiat
91–97	Corvara
98–99	Canjar
00	Zarovan

Public Image

Remember that the Vistani are neither well liked nor trusted among *giorgios*. There is a base 75% chance that any Vistani character is treated as a suspected criminal by non-Vistani, and if the *giorgios* have suffered any sort of unexplained trouble recently, the chance increases to 90%. Different peoples have varying levels of xenophobia that might lead them to

fear a Vistani hero, so a Dungeon Master can adjust this number for individual circumstances. In general, all *giorgios* regard Vistani with suspicion, and many seek to make scapegoats of them when problems occur, unless it is perfectly clear that the Vistani were not involved. Furthermore, a Vistani hero frequently brings retribution on the entire party (under the rubric that those who associate with thieves are themselves thieves), which can lead to more trouble than the rest of the adventurers are willing to risk.

Among other Vistani, the hero has a chance to be treated as a *giogoto*. The likelihood is 80% if the hero is related to the tribe he contacts, 60% if his blood is part of the *tasque*, and 25% otherwise. Recall that the Manusa do not differentiate between *giorgios* and *giogotos*, although they would certainly rather deal with another Vistani than a *giorgio* if they must make contact at all.

Alignment

Mortu Vistani heroes must be at least partially neutral in alignment (neutral good, neutral evil, or true neutral). Nonplayer character Vistani are almost always true neutral. Half-Vistani can be of any alignment.

Race

All Vistani are human, so only human heroes can take these kits. At the Dungeon Master's option, half-elves may also use Vistani kits (the human parent was a Vistana). Half-Vistani of human descent are represented by the race in *Domains of Dread*.

Vistani Universal Abilities

All Vistani kits confer the following abilities on the hero:

- Vistani characters have the ability to identify plants, animals, and pure water with perfect accuracy, as do druids.
- Those who take the Fire-building proficiency do not suffer penalties for igniting a flame in high winds, rainy conditions, or when using damp fuel. No proficiency check is required to start a fire.
- Vistani adventurers have a rough grasp of the *patterna*. They still must make an Intelligence check to translate the language, but they suffer only a 5% chance of misinterpreting the words.
- *Mortu* Vistani can find and interpret *paaterns* on a roll of 1–4 on 1d6.
- All Vistani heroes may take the Astrology proficiency, regardless of class. Wizards expend only one proficiency slot in doing so.

Vistani Universal Drawbacks

Having Vistani blood also has its downside. First, a side effect of static burn is that it reduces the Intelligence score of all *mortu* Vistani by 2 points. Half-Vistani are not affected by static burn, and they gain a +1 bonus to Intelligence and Wisdom scores, with a penalty of –2 to Charisma from their outcast status.

Second, these characters' relatively passive heritage precludes them from weapon specialization and extraordinary Strength, even if they are warriors. Third, wizards of all types are limited to the 10th level of experience, as *giorgio* prejudice has prevented them from receiving the highest quality training over the years. In fact, if the optional "pay-for-training" rules are used, Vistani heroes pay double the normal amount required to train as characters of any other class because they must, in effect, bribe *giorgio* masters to teach them their craft. Male Vistani specialist wizards can only become conjurers, enchanters, or illusionists; female Vistani can also become diviners. Vistani cannot be elementalists, and only half-Vistani can become arcanists.

Perhaps the worst drawback faced by adventurers with Vistani blood is moon madness. Their link to that

heavenly body is still so strong that they grow restless when it is full. Sleep eludes them, and they cannot regain lost hit points through resting during this time. All saving throws are at a –2 penalty until the Vistana rests for eight undisturbed hours. There is a 1% chance (rolled once, at the beginning of the period) they feel compelled to sneak off while their comrades are not watching and run under the stars. A simple word of restraint is sufficient to stop them, but they must make every effort to slip away. The Dungeon Master and player should make this check privately, and the character never admits he has been taken by the urge—no Vistana would ever willingly consent to physical restraints, in spite of the dangers.

During the three days of the full moon, a Vistani adventurer must make a madness check each day (officially at midnight). If he fails the check, the character is subject to the effects of madness as detailed in Chapter Six of *Domains of Dread*. The effects last until the next madness check, at which time a successful roll negates the condition completely (while a failure perpetuates the madness for another 24 hours). After the third day of the full moon, all madness passes.

Dungeon Masters can use the normal calendar to determine when the moon is full if they like, but the best way to incorporate this mechanic into the game is to keep track of game time and roll for madness every 30 days. If he desires, the Dungeon Master can rule that each domain "has its own moon." In this case, whenever the party enters a new domain, roll 1d20+1d10 to determine how many days pass before this moon next waxes full.

Roleplaying this condition is worthy of bonus experience points. Heroes who act quirkily during the three days of the moon should be rewarded for their efforts.

Vistani Tribal Abilities

The following text briefly describes the most likely temperament of each kit type, based on the tribe from which the hero draws his roots. However, the player is not constrained to conform to the description; it is merely a general guideline, intended to enhance roleplaying, which is the primary attraction behind generating a Vistani hero, after all. Each roleplaying introduction is followed by a short list of abilities peculiar to the kit. Dungeon Masters always have the option to allow players to mix and match the skills, as well as the authority to tone down any that unbalance the game.

Kamii

As a Kaldreshite, a Kamii hero is likely to be quiet and not confrontational. He does not offer an opinion unless it is asked for, and he would rather avoid combat if at all possible. Even so, he is more likely to be a warrior than any other class. He's quick with his hands, too, so he makes a good rogue as well. Kamii heroes cannot be any type of spellcaster.

A Kamii automatically possesses the Blacksmithing proficiency without expending any proficiency slots. He can identify metals and their origin within the current campaign. Furthermore, he can instantly identify any metalwork of Vistani make, and he has a 25% chance to detect whether it is cursed.

Equaar

Equaarians are the druids of the Vistani people, so heroes of this stock are quite comfortable around natural animals, especially horses. They are also excellent trackers. Like all Kaldresh, they are hard workers, but not overly aggressive. Equaar heroes can be any class (except paladin, of course), but they tend toward rangers, druids, and thieves.

An Equaarian automatically possesses the Animal Lore and

Land-based Riding proficiencies without expending any slots, and he can take the Tracking proficiency by expending only one slot.

Vatraska

These people are efficient healers, but they are not known for their compassion. Well-informed herbalists, they know much about curing illnesses and healing wounds, but they are not governed by an overwhelming desire to help. Rather, they act like cold professionals, often seeming condescending toward those they assist. In spite of their healing powers, they are rarely priests, and those who do subscribe to that class are usually druids.

A Vatraskan hero automatically has the Herbalist proficiency, regardless of class, and priests can take the Healing proficiency by expending only one slot. A Vatraskan can identify poisons as well as a druid can identify plants. Furthermore, at the Dungeon Master's option, a Vatraskan hero can prepare an antidote for any natural poison (which he can identify if a sample is available). However, the recipient of the antidote must make a successful saving throw vs. poison or die. (In essence, the antidote provides a reroll to heroes who fail a saving throw vs. poison.)

At the Dungeon Master's option, a hero of this tribe can gather, over the course of 1d6+1 days, the ingredients for two doses of a sleeping-draught poison. The preparation can be a powder or a liquid. It is tasteless and odorless, but it might taint the color of water slightly. The recipient must make a saving throw vs. poison; if the roll fails, he falls asleep for 1d4 rounds. The sleep is normal, and the victim may be easily awakened. Due to the natural ingredients in this concoction, it remains usable for just one week.

Naiat

Characters related to this tribe are bound to be more flamboyant than the next fellow. They like to dress well, eat well, captivate the opposite sex, and generally become the center of attention wherever they go. If they are *mortu*, chances are they left the tribe because they wanted to pursue fame and fortune in the *giorgio* world. Hence, the gypsy (from *Domains of Dread*) and bard are natural classes for this character. However, a Naiat character may be of any class except paladin or druid.

Heroes of this tribal affiliation automatically enjoy the Singing and Dancing proficiencies, and they are entitled to adopt the Musical Instrument proficiency regardless of class. They also add a +1 bonus to encounter reactions due to their outgoing attitudes (+2 if they roleplay the situation by doing the talking and attempting to be friendly). Finally, a Naiat character has a natural affinity for the violin, so he can influence the reactions of nonplayer characters and inspire allies with that instrument as a bard, regardless of class (if the character has taken the Musical Instrument proficiency).

Corvara

Heroes of this tribe are a bit more mercenary than other Vistani. They tend to wonder "what's in it for them" whenever they approach a new situation. They are loyal allies, but they do not forge alliances easily. Normally, a Corvaran must gain a full experience level in the company of others before he fully becomes a part of the group. Until then, he's along for the profits and must frequently be convinced to act as a team player. A Corvaran is almost always a thief, but he can be a fighter or wizard. No other classes are open to him.

Heroes of this bloodline automatically possess the Set Snares proficiency, regardless of class, as they have been on the paranoid side all their lives and wish to protect themselves. In fact, they are likely to exasperate fellow party members with

their constant fears of (and possibly checks for) traps and ambushes.

Thief characters gain a +10% bonus to Open Locks rolls.

Canjar

Characters of this tribe are forever standoffish, no matter how long they associate with a group of adventurers. They are fascinated by magic, and are therefore always wizards. Canjar are quite selfish with their magic, refusing to trade spells with anybody, but they like to be admired and appreciated for their powers, so they make every effort to appear useful and puissant among their companions.

A Canjar hero has a valuable ability: He can leave one 1st- and one 2nd-level spell each "unmemorized" when he finishes resting (and studying). If he later wishes to cast a spell he has not memorized, he can expend an open slot and cast any spell of the same level as if he'd memorized it, as long as its text is among the spellbooks he has with him. However, it costs one round to pull out his grimoire, look up the spell he wants, and read it over, after which time it instantly springs into his mind. In effect, the character is saying, "I had a feeling I'd need that spell."

On the next round, the spell can be cast normally. Note that once a spell is read from a Canjar's grimoire, it occupies the "blank" spot in its level—a wizard cannot look up a spell, decide not to cast it, and look up another later, even if the first was not actually cast.

Zarovan

Only one hero of Zarovan blood may travel with any single adventuring party. These characters are the ultimate loners. They spend long periods staring into empty space, and they never grow close to anyone. If they have a sense of humor, they do not show it, and if they have a sense of loyalty, it is deliberately unspoken. They remain silent unless the matter is extremely urgent. Zarovan heroes are not team players, but neither do they betray their companions. Rather, they do things for their own reasons, and they stay with a group of heroes because it fits some larger purpose, the nature of which they refuse to share. Like the Canjar, the Zarovan are always wizards.

Zarovan heroes have a unique condition: They are often unsure of *when* they are. Time is out of focus, and they are constantly slipping in and out of reality. This is reflected in combat after initiative is rolled. The Zarovani character selects 2d10, rolls them, and adds them together. The result is matched on the table below.

Zarovan Hero Time Movement

2d10	Result
2	–8 to opponent's attack roll; doubled actions (very fast)
3	–4 to opponent's attack roll
4–5	–2 to opponent's attack roll
6–8	–1 to opponent's attack roll
9–13	No penalties or bonuses (normal)
14–16	+1 to opponent's attack roll
17–18	+2 to opponent's attack roll
19	+4 to opponent's attack roll
20	+8 on opponent's attack roll; no actions at all (very slow)

A Zarovan hero who scores low on the 2d10 roll is moving very fast in time because of the stress of combat. The hero has no control over this, and no magical spell or device can affect this roll. If moving fast enough in time, the hero can make two complete rounds of actions in one round, including attacks, movement, spellcasting, or psionics use. A hero who scores high on the 2d10 roll, however, is moving more slowly through time because of the stress of combat, and is thus easier to hit and might possibly make no motion at all during the round!